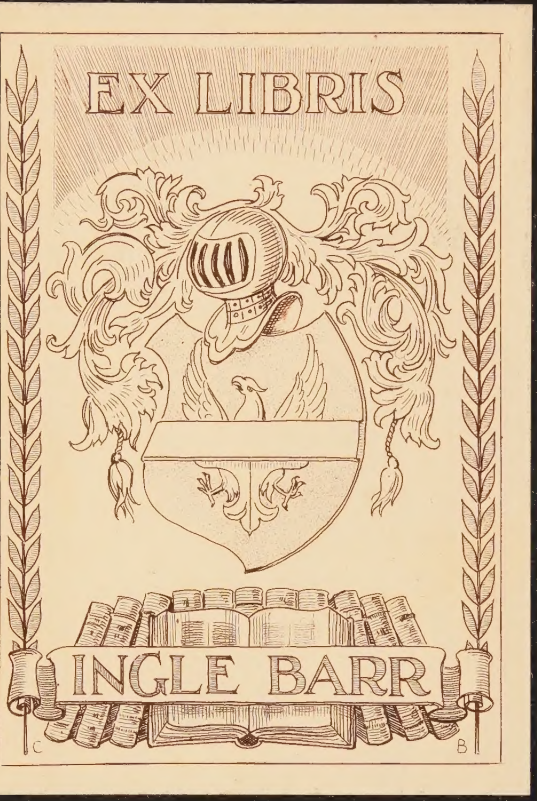
# A Colonial Reformer

Rolf Boldrewood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# A COLONIAL REFORMER

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# COLONIAL REFORMER

BY

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*IN THREE VOLUMES*

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## CHAPTER XV

Mr. Neuchamp was disposed to be wroth with himself when he discovered that he was looking forward with considerable interest to a much-talked-of ball, by which the Count von Schätterheims had resolved to mark his appreciation of the kindness which he had received at the hands of the Sydney 'upper ten.' Why should he feel gratified, Ernest asked himself, at the prospect of joining in an entertainment at best but a *réchauffé* of numberless affairs of the class which he had assisted at and despised in England? A ball—a mere ball—a stale repetition of the meaningless crust—the saltatory, amatory, and gustatory simulacra of pleasure, which he had long since renounced and abandoned. An entertainment chiefly composed of people he didn't know, and given by a man whom he did not like.

He finally disposed of the affair in his own mind by the summary, if illogical, decision, that he must regard himself, in respect of his late banishment from the world, in the light of a sailor after a protracted cruise, gifted with abnormal powers of assimilation and digestion, mental and physical.

Even in moments of sternest self-analysis men are not infrequently insincere and evasive. Perchance not

consciously. Were the moral processes incapable of such inflections, Ernest Neuchamp could never have concealed the fact from himself that he chiefly wished to attend this much-abused festivity, to which he had received a formal and ornate card, inclusive of the arms and crest of the noble family of Von Schätterheims, because it would be graced by the presence of Antonia Frankston.

Ernest did not find the very excellent dinner of which he partook at the club on the evening of the ball in any degree less palatable because of this mental conflict. He arrayed himself in the wampum and warpaint proper for such engagements as manufactured by Mr. Poole, of Saville Row, which decorations indeed had narrowly escaped being left behind as a superfluous part of his outfit at Neuchampstead. After a careful toilet he awaited in a slightly unphilosophical state of mind the arrival of the Frankston carriage, which was to call for him.

Punctually at ten the highly effective bays contributed their particular quota of gravel-scratching to the enormous aggregate of road friction which pervaded Sydney on that night, and Mr. Neuchamp, placed opposite to a wrapped and draped cloud of diaphanous material, which he conjectured to be a young lady, and most probably Antonia, from the similarity of voice, was whirled off towards the gate of happiness. Before they could approach that enchanted portal they became sensible of a line of lamp-lit vehicles apparently several miles long, at the remote end of which they were compelled to await the gradual debouching of the leading files. The opportunity was favourable for conversation, and Miss Frankston having disengaged apparently so much of her envelope as permitted free egress to her words, they commenced—

'What a lovely night! I was so afraid it would rain. I am sure it will be the most delightful ball we have ever had. I feel certain I shall enjoy myself immensely. It is ages since I have been to a dance.'

'I hope your anticipations may be realised,' quoth Ernest. 'Captain Cook was here, I think, when I last went to one. I had ceased to think them rational amusements long before I left home.'

'Oh! but then you are really dissipated in England, if what we hear of a London season be correct,' said Antonia. 'Two or three balls a night, and some engagement at least once every night. What girl could stand that? Now we poor colonists have perhaps two or three a month in our gayest time, and now and then, as now, one in half a year.'

'Well, doubtless the degree of dissipation makes some difference,' said Mr. Neuchamp, 'and I do not mind owning that I feel as I used to feel; as Hood's seamstress says, before I knew the words of "drums and matinées, crushes and staircase charges, with all the melancholy melée of supper, when nobody could eat if they had any appetite, or could have appetite if they would eat."'

'You are not in a very promising state of mind,' said Antonia, 'so I think I can provide you with plenty of real dancing, if you wish, plenty of nice partners, not anything dangerous in the way of crush; and if you take me in to supper, I will guarantee you something to eat.'

'Well done,' said Paul; 'I'll back you up in all you have said. Ernest will see no end of nice girls, who will dance him off his legs, unless he's very fit indeed; I think the music isn't bad, and Dettmann generally gives you something worth eating, and, more particularly, drinking. I'm the man to be pitied.'

'Why, you naughty papa?' said the veiled figure.

'Because just about this time I ought to be smoking my third cigar, and going peacefully to bed, whereby I should wake up with a clear head, a good appetite, and a strong idea that I was going to make some money before noon; instead of which, to-morrow morning, most probably, I shall be slightly feverish, eat no breakfast, and have a general conviction that stocks are going down, discounts rising, and the country going to the bad generally.'

'Not if you play whist steadily with old Mr. Howler, the Colonel, and Dr. Whyte; get the Colonel for a partner, and you'll be sure to win.'

'That's all very well,' said the sacrificial parent, 'but five or six hours are not so easy to dispose of at sixty odd. I foresee that I shall eat and drink imprudently, catch cold, have a highly unpleasant next morning, with a hint of indigestion, bile, and lumbago.'

'How differently pleasure affects us, at sixteen and sixty,' observed Ernest with an air of solemn conviction.

'I call that very cruel,' said Antonia. 'I always want papa to let me go with Mrs. Evergreen, but he prefers to martyrise himself, like a dear old papa as he is.'

'Well, perhaps he likes to look at his little girl enjoying herself,' said old Paul. 'I can weather it out yet, perhaps better than I say. I was fond enough of fun myself, and have had some strange dances in strange places, with strange company. I remember once——'

'Come, papa!' said the veiled prophetess warningly.

'Well, only this one; we shall soon be out. I was once down in New Zealand, in the old times, long enough ago, before the gold and the Government, and just as we went ashore at Motiki we heard that the principal Pakeha-

Maori, an old sea-captain of course, was going to give a dance and a grand spread. We were wild for fun of course; been out thirteen months. Well, the old boy, a grizzled, hard-weather-looking old sea-dog, asked us all, captain, supercargo, and officers.'

'I daresay it was very characteristic,' said Ernest; 'what were the ladies like?'

'Well, a majority of the wives and daughters of the British settlers were Maoris. It was very rich land, and old Blackbeard had secured a considerable slice. He had a Maori wife, and ever so many daughters. The youngest was a great beauty, splendid eyes, such a figure, and so on; I was quite a youngster, and bashful, so I said to the old skipper, "Please introduce me to your youngest daughter, Captain Blackbeard." The old pirate looked at me for a minute from under his grizzled eyebrows, and then growled out—"How do you suppose I introduced myself to her mother? go and hail the craft yourself"—which I did, and I never wish——'

'Papa!' said Antonia, with great distinctness of intonation. 'Here we are at the step. Please go first, and you will give me room to extricate myself.'

Mr. Frankston delivered himself upon the carpet spread from hall to staircase with an adroitness which seemed a reminiscence of old seamanship, and following Miss Frankston and her father, Mr. Neuchamp entered the first ballroom in Australia which had been honoured by his presence.

Close to the door of a nobly proportioned, brilliantly lighted, profusely decorated, and extremely well-filled apartment, stood their noble friend and host, gorgeously attired in the uniform of a colonel of Landwehr, and shining like a constellation of the first magnitude among

the more unpretending naval and regimental officers then quartered and stationed at Sydney.

As he took the hand of Miss Frankston, and bowed low over it, with an assumption of chivalrous deference, only permitted to a foreigner, Ernest felt a mad desire to then and there kick him down the stairs of his own ballroom. Controlling this perhaps not strictly defensible impulse, he drew back, as the Count shook Paul's hand with a delicate yet cordial deference appropriate to an honoured father in prospect, and evidently, to that nobleman's astonishment, bowed very stiffly and followed his friends. A large family party, including half a dozen smiling and whispering girls, evidently delighted by the cordial welcome they experienced from their distinguished entertainer, covered his retreat. The night was superbly beautiful. At no great distance lay the slumbering sea-lake; while over the silver plain clusters of glancing lights gleamed, beneath the broad illuminated balcony of the ballroom. Unless Ernest's heart had been much more ill at ease than circumstances rendered possible, it would have been hard at his time of life for aught but pleasure, for a little space, to bear sway.

The floor was perfection; the music, that of a military band, which had but the year before played in the great square at Pera, which had been at the front during the terrible northern campaign, yet fresh in men's minds, well coached by a music-loving, fastidious colonel, was pealing out the 'Schöner blauer Donau' with wondrous time and spirit.

Mr. Neuchamp had been sufficiently awake to his opportunities to engage Antonia for the first *deux-temps valse* after they entered the room, and the after-supper galop, taking his chance of anything intermediate.

'That is good music,' said he; 'I heard it in Vienna last. Suppose we join these very sincere performers.'

Antonia replied by a frank smile of assent, and as he took one comprehensive glance over face and figure ere he clasped the slight yielding waist, he thought he had consistently underrated her beauty.

The light was of course eminently favourable to her clear though colourless complexion; her eyes, sparkling with frank unstudied enjoyment of the entertainment, shone with unwonted lustre, while the perfection of her slight but rounded figure was clearly apparent; and as they swept adown the crowded hall Mr. Neuchamp, though he had not been numbered among the lavender-kid-wearing tribe of modern youth of late years, danced very well, and we may add looked very well, in that much-abused, but as yet unsuperseded garb, than which no other befits so well a gentleman on evening pleasure bent. Perhaps we have not devoted sufficient space heretofore to the limning of the hero's personal charms and graces. These were perhaps sufficient though not remarkable.

Ernest Neuchamp, somewhat above the middle height, had, without any particular athletic ostentation, the square form and well-knit figure of an ordinary English aristocrat. Though possessing more endurance than strength, he by no means fell short of that necessary endowment. One saw fairly regular features, comprising a pair of searching grayish blue eyes, very multiform as to expression, a clear-cut firm mouth, and light-brown hair inclining to curl, which I need not say was very closely cut on the present occasion. Brown-bearded, and rather sunburned, as to his original delicate complexion, he was by no means a bad representation, had

he donned armour, of one of his crusading ancestors just returned from Ascalon or Engadi with all the prestige of a good knight and a whole heart for the ladye-fayre, who awaited his coming amid her bower-maidens.

As it was he was restricted to the simple dress, the simple speech, of a modern English gentleman, yet was there about him a freshness, sincerity, and unassumed refinement of manner not unlike that of the best class of naval men, which made him extremely acceptable to women, and which Antonia Frankston in her heart of hearts had always recognised.

The dance was not a particularly short one. Ernest was in reasonably good training after his up-country experience, and Antonia was one of those rare—too rare danseuses that unite in perfection time, pace, grace, and staying power. She could fly down the crowded ball-room properly supported by a partner *de la première force*, halt, turn, glide in and amid the labyrinth of dancers, without thought or question of collision. Instinctively true to every note of the music, to every movement of her partner, she seemed as if she possessed the latent power and tireless speed of Atalanta of old, did she but deign to exert them.

The music ceased, annotated by a very audible sigh on the part of Ernest, who was impelled to say that he never expected to enjoy a dance again so much as long as he lived.

'There is nothing like dancing,' said Antonia, apparently as cool as a statuette. 'But I think the balcony will be pleasanter. I must show you all the people.'

In their path was a portly white-waiscoated personage of placid and smiling aspect, who, bestowing upon

Antonia a most respectful bow, shook Ernest's hand warmly.

'Ah, Neuchamp, my dear fellow, delighted to see you. Not bought a run yet? You're losing splendid opportunities. Let Gammon Downs slip through your fingers—eh? Sold it to Rawson and Rowdy since. Great bargain.'

'Indeed!' said Ernest, smiling. 'Well, they are the best judges of their own line of action. How are they doing? Making lots of money?'

'Well, they ought to—ought to—but I'm afraid they're not very good managers. Rawson's rather slow—Rowdy's too fast. However, I can't help that. Do you happen to want a crack run, my dear Neuchamp? I've got Brigalow Park and Mallee Meadows for sale, a real bargain; quite a——'

'Not just at present,' said Ernest, preparing to move past. 'See you at the club. The Count seems to be enjoying himself—who is the lady?' This last observation was elicited by the appearance of the noble host, who passed at a little distance with a very handsome and magnificently dressed girl upon his arm, talking in the most *empressé* manner; while she, conscious of being at that moment an object of envy to the great majority of her sex, there and then present, listened with apparent pleasure.

'Oh, that's Miss Folleton, of Fairmount. Fine girl, isn't she? Will have forty thousand on her wedding-day,' said Selmore, who knew everybody and everything; or said he did, which was much the same. 'Not that Von Schätterheims cares for that. Immense property of his own, vast estates in Silesia, nearly as many sheep as Esterhazy—that's why he comes out here. Thinks of investing—met him abroad myself.'

'Indeed,' said Ernest; 'haven't you anything that will suit him?'

'Well,' said Selmore, looking, for him, slightly confused and glancing at Antonia, who was regarding him critically, 'I told him that Mallee Meadows and the other place might suit him, but he wants a resident partner. How would you like to go in with him? You're just the man that would suit him.'

'Can't bear partners,' replied Ernest shortly; 'I am afraid his highness and I wouldn't agree. I think I see a seat, Miss Frankston.'

'I dislike that man intensely,' said Antonia, as they moved on. 'I think him so selfish and unprincipled. I wonder if he has inveigled the Count into one of his bargains, as he calls them?'

'From a cursory examination of your high-born friend's conversation,' said Ernest, 'I think he may be trusted to take care of himself in matters of finance, as indeed is the case with most foreigners.'

'Now, is not that a very prejudiced though English speech? You cannot really believe that because a man is born on the continent of Europe he must be less trustworthy than any one from that wonderful little island of yours?'

'I didn't say so; I ought to qualify such a wholesale sentiment. Whether the right sort of foreigner does not emigrate I cannot tell. But the idea has struck others besides myself, and I must confess to a "Dr. Fell" sort of instinctive feeling about our distinguished friend.'

'Sheer prejudice and perhaps the least bit of jealousy, shall I say, on your part,' continued Antonia.

'But why jealousy?'

'Well, I mean it to apply to all of you men who run

down the poor Count so. *We* are all great admirers of him, and that, I am afraid, does not make him popular with your sex. Here's Mr. Croker coming to claim me for next dance. There now, he'll abuse him—but he does that about everybody. Are you sure that this is our dance?' mischievously commenced the young lady, as that gentleman arrived.

'I think so,' said Croker superciliously, 'unless you have a chance of the Count, in which case of course you'll throw me and Neuchamp over—I expect nothing else.'

'Not surely if I were engaged to Mr. Jermyn Croker!' said she; and looking at her programme, 'I really am engaged to you for the quadrille, but why am I accused of pursuing the Count von Schätterheims?'

'Because every one runs after him—men, women, and children,' said Croker. 'The whole city seems transformed into a sort of Bedlam.'

'But why do they run after him?' inquired Miss Frankston.

'Why?' repeated Mr. Croker, with an air of ineffable disdain, 'because they're all fools, I suppose; except a few, a very few.'

'And why are they excepted?' said Ernest, who commenced to be amused at his daring unsparing cynicism.

'Because they're mad—stark, staring mad.'

'Now really, Mr. Croker, don't you believe about the Count's great wealth and estates? his charming manner at any rate can't be put on.'

'*I* believe in him. *I?*' demanded Croker, with an air of intense and reproachful amazement ludicrous to witness. 'Do you know what my opinion of the fellow is?'

'Can't say, really; something very complimentary to

him and diffident on your part, judging from Mr. Croker's well-known character,' said Antonia coolly.

'Well, then, if you will have it,' said that satirist wrathfully, and as if all necessity for social dissimulation had been obviated, 'I believe the fellow is an impostor and a swindler; very likely a valet, or a courier, who has bolted with his master's cash, clothes, and papers. As for his manners, everybody in the country he comes from has the same manner, from the kellner to the kaiser. His accent ought to betray him ; but no one here knows German well enough to find it out.'

'Really, Mr. Croker, you can take away a man's, a horse's, or a country's reputation more completely in less time than any one I ever met. You're so delightfully bitter that I *must* dance with you. Come along!'

Left to himself for a while, Mr. Neuchamp devoted his leisure to a survey of the room and the company. He was astonished at the beauty and grace of the lady portion of the guests, and he thought he had never seen anything more graceful than the ease and celerity with which the greater part of the crowd glided in the dance over the polished floor.

The occasional squatter, lounging, but stalwart and dignified, together with the gay uniforms of the soldiers and blue-jackets, gave novelty and contrast to the scene; but the majority of the younger men who belonged to Sydney proper were pale, slight, and rather undignified youngsters, by no means worthy the handsome, stately girls who were fain to accept them as partners. For the rest, the ordinary ballroom routine was not departed from; and Ernest, after another dance or two, was not sorry when the move to supper reminded him to possess

himself of Antonia, who had promised him the first following dance.

Nothing in its way could have been more complete than the dangerous and superfluous but fascinating meal. The wines were chosen with a studious care, which reflected the greatest honour upon the Count's taste and foresight.

The champagne and chicken had been succeeded by fruit and flirtation. The ladies were in expectation of the accustomed signal, when Mr. Hartley Selmore rose, 'with the permission of his friends, to make a few observations and to propose a toast. Would gentlemen—ay, and ladies too—fill their glasses, and prepare themselves for a toast to which his poor powers were miserably inadequate?'

These preliminary suggestions were cheerfully complied with, as indeed is invariably the case, the cheapest of all compliments being, surely, to drink another glass of wine at the expense of your entertainer. Then, with one hand in the breast of his ample waistcoat, Mr. Selmore smilingly confronted the expectant throng, and with the readiness of a born talker and something of the ease of a trained orator, thus delivered himself:—

Ladies and Gentlemen—One of the first observations that we shall make when we leave this hall will assuredly be that we never spent a pleasanter night in our lives, never saw any festivity more perfect in the arrangement of every detail, never had the good fortune to accept more lavish and splendid yet delicate and graceful hospitality. Then why not say it now? (Cheers and approbation.) Frankly, then, even in the presence of the noble and distinguished personage who has honoured this colony, this city, this society, with his presence, I venture to avow the sentiment of my heart, of every heart, let me say, now beating responsively to these humble expressions of the general feeling. (Loud cheering.) Some of us may have been struck with the wonderful perfection which has

accompanied every detail, however small, even to the novel arrangement of the matchless feast we have just arisen from ; but who does not know that the master mind, which is capable of conceptions the most vast and varied with regard to the welfare of nations or the march of armies, disdains not to stoop to the peasant's farm, to the soldier's shoe-buckle.

When I lead your minds, ladies and gentlemen, to the idea of the characteristics of great generals, of reigning princes, of the blood-royal of one of the most ancient sovereignties of the universe, am I violating any confidence when I state, in corroboration of that half involuntary disclosure, that no one who, like myself, has had the privilege of beholding those royal personages, of marking their prevailing type of feature, can doubt, by comparison with the countenance of our noble entertainer, the Count von Schätterheims, of his near and intimate relationship with that royal house. (Tremendous and enthusiastic cheering, with direction of all eyes upon the Count, whose presumably princely lineaments were as immovably unconscious as if he had been a statue of Kaiser Fritz.)

I may be indiscreet, ladies and gentlemen ; I may, carried away by my natural feelings of friendship and by the contagion of your enthusiastic assent to my simple and straightforward statements, have spoken with more frankness than prudence, but my heart forgives me ; my noble friend, I feel assured, forgives me ; and you, ladies and gentlemen, will, under the circumstances, forgive me also. I have the liveliest pleasure in proposing the health of the Count von Schätterheims.

When the storm of cheering, the volleys of applause, the waving of handkerchiefs, had subsided, the noble Count himself, rather pale, but collected and calm as of custom, rose in his place to return thanks, which feat he performed as follows :—

Latees and Gendlemens—Many very danks.

The return speech had the merit of brevity—perhaps in excess ; but as the Count placed his hand on his heart and bowed low thrice, throwing all the expression (and that was a considerable allowance) that he could

manage into his eyes, so directed that not only Miss Folleton, but at least six other young ladies, imagined that she alone was the object of those tender and pleading glances, it suddenly struck the assembled crowd that it was an intentional and masterly stroke of mingled humour and consideration. As the band, by preconcerted signal, struck up the glorious and entrancing galop which had been kept in reserve for the after-supper dance, the ladies and the younger men saw another instance of the Count's marvellous foresight—for them in particular—and once more they joined in general and unmeasured applause.

The Count, who had by this time secured the radiant Miss Folleton, bowed low and led the way to the freshly decorated ballroom, all the approaches to which were filled with the choicest exotics.

Was not it an utterly perfect galop, such as that entrancing after-supper dream-dance with the 'dear new angel,' or our favourite friend that used to be, 'Consule Planco'? Oh, the dances of our lost youth, realising in every gliding sweep and trancing whirl the most exalted conceptions of music, poetry, choregraphic grace, and intoxicating proximity to female loveliness, when, if at any time possible, a fold or two of the jealous marble of reserve is thrown back. Within a fast fleeting hour from this dance of dances did Mr. Neuchamp put Miss Frankston into the carriage attended by her grateful parent, who was truly tired of his life under circumstances of festivity, and dying to get to bed.

'Ha! Neuchamp,' said Croker, as he returned to the disenchanted ballroom, 'you look exhausted. Come and have a parting glass of the Count's Roederer. I stick to that; we shall never see any more of it, I feel sure.'

'Why?' demanded Ernest; 'you're rather hard upon our noble entertainer. You allow that his wine is very good.'

'Good wine costs no more than bad under certain circumstances,' replied Croker sardonically.

'What do you mean?' asked Ernest.

'Mean! Why, that Yorick and Co. will never see a farthing of their money. I really feel uneasy about our share in the swindle,' continued Croker, filling a large glass with iced hock, then drinking it slowly and with great apparent relish.

'Great heavens!' ejaculated Ernest, 'I can't believe it. I won't taste a drop. And what do you suppose will happen to Von Schätterheims?'

'The devil only knows, who will probably stick to him for a season staunchly enough. He will make a bolt, or a warrant of extradition, including an assassination and two stupendous jewel robberies, will fetch him.'

'You are strongly prejudiced,' said Ernest, deeply shocked and ashamed of his own mild suspicions.

'Slightly so, perhaps; it runs in my family. I detest *all* foreigners, and believe them to be capable of anything.'

'That's rather hard measure, don't you think?'

'Not at all,' said Croker, finishing the wine. 'Foreigners are not so madly given to travel as we fools of English people; take my word for it, no foreigner of character and position would come out to an infernal hole of a place like this colony. Your friend Paul seems shaky, slightly apoplectic, or perhaps complaint in the *chest*; half those mercantile beggars are shams. Daughter gone off very much, looks quite *passée*. Goodnight; I'm off.'

With these few consoling remarks, which Ernest felt much inclined to resent by personal protest, Mr. Jermyn Croker betook himself to the smoking-room of the New Holland, whence, having abused the ball, the guests, the giver, the lights, the decorations, everything, in fact, but the wine, of which he certainly had secured his share, he departed to bed in a consistently uncharitable state of mind with all men.

Paul did not show up at the office next day, and as the afternoon had been fixed for boat-sailing, as a refreshing and suitable recreation to neutralise the somewhat reactionary season which succeeds a ball, Ernest made his way to Morahmee soon after lunch.

There he found Antonia very becomingly dressed in yachting costume, which from its simplicity afforded a telling contrast to the *grande tenue* of the previous night. Paul, with a couple of sailor-looking men, was down at the jetty, and after a little preliminary trimming and delay in sending for extra ballast, they were all seated and skimming over the bright waters of the harbour, with a light but favourable breeze. Mr. Windsor, invited by particular request of Mr. Frankston, sat forward in company with the crew, and assumed an air of ease and satisfaction which that roamer of the waste was as far from feeling as a pilgrim Bedouin on board a Red Sea steamer.

But no thoughts, save of the most childishly unalloyed happiness, possessed the hearts of Paul Frankston and his daughter. The old man was a born and bred sea-dog, and it was wondrous to mark how his nature rose and became exalted as he found himself upon the familiar element on which the joyous time of youth, the *sturm und drang* period of his strong manhood, had been passed.

Again his eye lightened, and the old gleam of pride and daring spoke from it of the days when he had volunteered for more than one maritime forlorn hope; had consorted gaily with danger; had dared the clubs, the poisoned arrows of cannibal savages; or had cowed a mutinous, scowling crew by the magic of a stern front and a steady pistol. Even his voice was altered, and he gave the slight but necessary orders in a clear peremptory tone of command which Ernest had never heard from his lips before.

For Antonia, she revelled in the free breeze, the brilliant sea and sky, like a happy child, and as a glancing spray fell lightly over them, she carolled forth the refrain of a sea song with a nerve and animation by no means usual.

'Is not this lovely fresh life a renewal of all one's senses?' she cried. 'I feel as if an additional one, indescribable and amazing, was given to me whenever I am on blue water. You know we are all great sailors and boatmen in this Sydney harbour of ours. Look at the numbers of skiffs, pleasure boats, and yachts that are now skimming about like seamews in all directions.'

'Rather too many for my fancy. Every now and then accidents occur, plain sailing as everything looks just now. The gusts which come down across these points are like small white squalls.'

'Ah! but the present, my darling old pappy,' sighed Antonia, 'what can possibly be more glorious for mere mortals? Why should we grieve ourselves with the past or possible sorrows? Can anything be more dreamily lovely than that pale amber sky over which the dark blue shadow is creeping from the headland? What can surpass the softly-gliding magical motion with so much

swiftness and so little effort? I don't wonder that a sea life has always gathered to it so much poetry and romance. I fell in love with a pirate once.'

'With a pirate? Where?' exclaimed Ernest, surprised out of the placid enjoyment which pervaded the whole party.

'In a book, of course,' answered she; 'you didn't think we entertained such gallant rovers at Morahmee, except, like angels, unawares? But he was such a delightful creature. I remember the lines still.'

'Perhaps you wouldn't mind repeating them.'

'Oh yes. I shall never forget them, I am sure,' the girl answered, looking seawards. 'I found them in an old—old—annual. You shall judge:—

'Our Captain, he is young and fair,
How can he look so young?
His locks of youth, his golden hair,
Are o'er his shoulders flung.

'Of all the deeds that he has done
Not one has left a trace,
The midnight cup, the noontide sun
Has darken'd not his face.

'His voice is low, his smile is sweet,
He has a girl's blue eyes,
And yet far rather would I meet
The storm in yonder skies.

'The fiercest of our pirate band
Holds, at his name, the breath;
For there is blood on his right hand,
And in his heart is death.

'He knows he rides upon his grave,
Yet careless is his eye;
He looks with scorn upon the wave,
With scorn upon the sky.'

'Not a bad conception, I admit,' said Ernest, 'though, doubtless, violently untrue to nature. In all ages poets and romance writers, who are humbugs to a man, have laboured to unite personal beauty and winning gentleness of manner with the capacity for remorseless crime. I think, perhaps, that the young Spaniard in *Tom Cringle's Log* is as good a specimen of the thoroughbred upstanding pirate as any of those gentry whose acquaintance I have made, like you, in print.'

'I saw eight-and-thirty of the ruffians strung up in one day, at a Spanish West Indian port, once,' said Paul. 'They said their prayers, kissed their crucifixes, and died in the coolest and most edifying way.'

'And were they very bad men, papa?'

'Awful scoundrels,' said her father, with a certain relish, as he recalled the reminiscence. 'We only escaped them by a miracle; so I felt no compunction in seeing them elevated.'

'And what became of the ship they did capture?' inquired Antonia.

'They took everything of value from the vessel, including a few prisoners they meant to ransom, and then scuttled her, leaving the crew and passengers to perish.'

'How fiendish! and they were nearly catching my darling old father,' exclaimed the girl. 'I must reconsider the question of pirates. But were they all as bad as that, papa?'

'Worse, if possible,' said Mr. Frankston uncompromisingly. 'They knew that there was a rope ready for each man's neck when he was caught, and this knowledge did not incline them to mercy, you may be sure. Chinamen are perhaps as dangerous rascals, in that line, as you can meet. They are no great sailors; but if you get

becalmed in their waters, and a few crowded prahus come round you, your chance is a bad one.'

'And will they fight?' inquired Ernest. 'I thought one jack-tar was worth a dozen of them.'

'So they are in one way—in a fair fight, or in a case of boarding, or in bad weather. But these vagabonds are very careless of life. They never give quarter and don't care much about taking it, not being used to it, so you may imagine how they fight. I have seen a fellow fairly cut to pieces before he left off fighting, and I really believed—I was a boy then—that the kriss moved in his clenched hand after the arm was cut off.'

'In that case they may trouble the world yet,' affirmed Ernest. 'A nation of three hundred millions, with sufficient ingenuity to comprehend Whitworth and Snider, and animal courage to fight to the death, might execute another avalanche movement such as when Attila (of kindred blood, we must remember) swept over Europe.'

'Not in our time, at any rate,' quoth Paul, with epicurean indifference. 'Ah Tin will require a deal of drill before that march takes place. Now, then, here we are off Red Point. Suppose we get the lines out and have some fishing.'

The deep-sea lines were produced by the two 'water-side characters' who composed the crew, and suitable bait being forthcoming from some mysterious receptacle, the somewhat serious recreation of schnapper-fishing commenced. Perhaps the poetry of the piscatory art cannot be dissociated from the mimic ephemera with which the fisherman of Europe deceives the leaping trout and the king of all river fish, the mighty salmon, as the angler standing under the ruined wall of a Norman stronghold,

patiently whips the purling stream which has furnished relays of delicate fare for a thousand years. Nor is his sport heightened by historic association. The captor of *Salmo salar* passes from stage to stage of doubt, hope, fear, agony, despair, to unspeakable triumph, as after endless patient playing, he draws within reach of the deadly gaff the captive monarch. But, Izaak Walton notwithstanding, a good afternoon's fishing in or off Sydney harbour, when the deep-sea denizens are fain and fearless, is not to be despised.

Mr. John Windsor was considerably surprised, though he was careful not to show it, as the first fish, a twelve-pound schnapper, came up glancing and glimmering through the clear water at the end of Mr. Frankston's line. A rock-cod or two, with their brilliant colouring, added to his wondering observation. But he was, perhaps, more nearly driven from his habitual coolness when a yard-long dogfish was dropped into the bottom of the boat, sufficiently near his legs to cause the lower portions of those limbs to shrink and stiffen, as the ocean-Ishmaelite snapped its sharp teeth within an inch of his ankles.

'I think we must have got about half a boat load,' said Paul at length, after a continuous course of baiting, lowering, and hauling up. 'As the day is so fine, we may go through the Heads for a run out, and then turn back and beat home.'

They glided through the comparatively narrow entrance, on either side of which frowns sullenly the vast sandstone promontory, seamed, channelled, and scarped by winter wind and ocean wave, that for ages have raved and dashed against its sentinel form. Southward a mile or two, and still the deep sea rolls on with slow but resist-

less force against the base of the tremendous, all inaccessible cliffs which frown a hundred fathoms above.

'I never pass this place,' said Antonia musingly, 'without thinking of that heartrending wreck of the *Dunbar*. A wreck, at best, is a dreadful thing; but think of these poor creatures, as near to their journey's end as we are now, only to find a death in the midst of angry breakers and rocks and the dread midnight. How many deaths must they have died! God save us all from a fate like this—

'On the reef of Norman's woe.'

'I did hear something about a vessel going on shore with all hands, near the Heads,' said Ernest. 'And was this the very place? Was there any carelessness?'

'Poor Grant was as good a seaman as ever trod plank. I knew him well,' said Mr. Frankston. 'He had been first mate of her for years, under old Fleetby, and this was his second voyage in command. He was as smart a man as Charley Carryall, and that is saying a good deal.'

'What was the cause, then, of the disaster? It seems so near the port of entrance.'

'It wasn't weather like this, you may be sure,' said Paul. 'Unluckily, after a first-class run, poor Grant made the light, sometime after nightfall, on as misty, driving, dirty a night as ever these old rocks saw. He stood off and on until an hour or so past midnight, when, finding the gale increasing and the wind setting in dead inshore, he determined to run for the Heads, trusting to his own seamanship and his close knowledge of the channel, that he had passed through a score of times in all weathers, at all hours of day and night.'

'But how could he miss the proper opening?' asked Ernest.

'God knows! The weather was awful. The coast just here does change shape a little, as if there was an opening. The ship had been driven in too close ashore; if they saw the lighthouse, her course would bring her stem on to these awful rocks. It seems that they never knew their mistake till they were among the breakers.'

'And how could that be known?'

'*One* man was saved,' answered Paul. 'The last thing he saw of poor Grant was forward, in the chains. That was just before she struck. When she did strike she must have gone to pieces in ten minutes, and two hundred passengers, who were dreaming of home and friends, or the sweet sight of shore with the morning sun, ere that sun rose were drifting or mangled corpses.'

'What a day of mourning it was in Sydney!' said Antonia; 'hardly a family in the city but had friends or relations on board. A favourite ship, with a favourite captain, numbers of returning colonists had waited or hurried in order to sail by her.'

'We must all take our chances, my dear, more particularly those people who are foolish enough to be sailors. Hector Grant met a sailor's death, and I'll swear he took his lot coolly when it came, caring more for the poor passengers than himself. For them it was different. I always pitied the landsmen and their families, when I stood a fair chance of going to Davy Jones myself. Hallo! the wind's shifted two points. There's an ugly bank, too. It will give us enough to do to get home before the southerly breeze comes up.'

As they commenced to beat back against the breeze, which, appearing to gain strength rapidly, necessitated

rather more promptness and seamanship than their outward-bound voyaging had required, Ernest was constrained to admire the coolness and total absence of timidity which Miss Frankston displayed.

Doubtless she was accustomed to boat-sailing and yachting in all its various forms, and was familiar with the eccentricities of the harbour navigation. Still, as the breeze freshened, the sky darkened, and from time to time the spray broke over the tiny cutter, now leaning over till the gunwale dipped, in a manner that did not suit Jack Windsor at all, as the thought obtruded itself that if the southerly gale, which Paul Frankston's experienced eye looked for, broke over them before they reached the shelter of the solid Morahmee pier they might possibly founder. Ernest wondered if his fair companion fully realised her position, or whether her calm indifference was merely ignorance of the danger.

His mind was set at rest upon the point presently.

'Papa!' she said, looking first at the sky and then at the merchant, who, with all the skipper in his stern set face and steady eye, was looking to windward not altogether cheerfully, 'don't you think we shall be hard set to get home before the "brickfielder" fall upon us?'

'I do indeed, darling,' said the old man. 'I wish I had been keeping my weather eye open, instead of gossiping about the *Dunbar* people, poor souls. For all we know, we may make another business of the same sort, in a small way.'

'Then don't you think we might carry more sail? You know poor little *Haidée* here will let you drive her under almost when she's on a wind, and a knot an hour more may make all the difference.'

'I think Miss is right, sir,' said the oldest of the crew,

'we've not a minute to throw away; and if it ain't coming up heavier and thicker from the south, my name ain't Johnny Jones.'

As the necessary dispositions were made, Antonia watched keenly and critically the altered motion of the boat, which lay down to the now angry sea, as if every fresh gust would bury her beneath the heaving billow; and having apparently satisfied herself that the maximum of speed, combined with the smallest possible margin of safety, had been attained, lay back and quietly awaited the progress of events.

'Hers is no soulless insensibility to danger,' thought Mr. Neuchamp to himself. 'Rather a full comprehension of risk, and even not improbable loss, dominated by the calm courage which wills and reasons in the face of death.

'A perfect woman nobly planned
To——'

Mr. Neuchamp was prevented from continuing his quotation by a sudden ejaculation of Mr. Windsor, across whose person, as the boat dipped deeply, a wave of greater magnitude than usual broke and foamed.

'By the powers!' exclaimed he, 'this was never put down in the agreement, or John Windsor wouldn't have been here. Are you quite sure, sir, we ain't taking a short cut, and getting away from our regular track? I should like to get out of this trap and walk. I can swim though above a bit, so if we are regularly spilt I may, perhaps, help the young lady.'

'Do you know what that is?' asked Mr. Frankston, pointing to a black curved substance out of the water, and apparently belonging to some submarine monster

which was proceeding in a parallel direction, and at no great distance.

'Not a know do I know,' replied the bushman.

'It's the back fin of a *shark*, and he's no small one either. He'd pick us up at his leisure, if anything happened to the boat, like a turkey among grasshoppers.'

'By George!' said the man of the forest, 'I wish I was on Ben Bolt now, without saddle or bridle, and him bucking his best, this minute! There is some get away, if anything broke, short of your neck. But here it seems to be the Never-Never country, and no mistake.'

They had made what is nautically called 'a long board,' in tacking at immense angles, so as to take fullest advantage of the wind, which seemed to increase rapidly, until something like the foretaste of the fury of a gale was upon them. The sky had darkened; night was not far distant. The sea had risen, and the long-backed rollers made it increasingly difficult for so small a craft to avoid an upset. Nothing but the splendid steering of their skipper, the perfect handling of the crew, combined with the weatherly qualities of the *Haidée*, gave them the chance of riding it out.

'Steady all, and look out for your heads while she jibes,' sung out old Paul. 'I think we shall fetch smooth water with this tack; if so we're safe for dinner, with better appetites than usual.'

'And if not?' inquired Ernest, with an anxious gaze at Antonia, who sat drenched with spray and pale, but with the most perfect composure visible upon her unmoved features.

'Did you ever hear tell of one Davy Jones?' made answer Mr. Frankston, whose furrowed face, torn with anxiety for the fate of his soul's darling, contradicted the

lightness of his tone, 'for if we are sent back into the gale, we are very like to mess with him this evening.'

And now, as the tiny bark swung round to her altered course, and, lying close up to the wind, flew down with hazardous swiftness towards the entrance to the little bay, which to them was a haven of safety, Ernest, true to his lifelong habit of observation, scanned the faces of his companions with half-unconscious curiosity.

Calm and strong sat the old man, with the tiller in his sinewy hand; his eye was steady, his hand was true, and none could have told by reading his countenance that the life of one he held a thousandfold dearer than his own hung on the balance of a frail boat and a stormy sea.

The two sailors had the ordinary non-committal expression always observable in trained seamen, unvarying apparently, whether a sail be split, a leak be sprung, or a hopeless fire be discovered in the hold.

Mr. Windsor, unconsciously holding on tightly to the thwart upon which he sat, as though looseness of seat might operate prejudicially, as in the countless equine dangers which he had braved, was evidently of opinion, with Panurge, that a cabbage planter was a man to be envied.

On the pale clear-cut features of the Australian maiden sat a wondrous calm, not wholly unmingled with mental exaltation, as of a Greek heroine devoted to death yet favoured of the gods. The wild night breeze had blown back her hair, yet, as she leaned forward and gazed fearlessly at the course, nothing could have improved the statuesque ease and grace of her pose. One of the rare personages who, either from instinctive adaptation or finished training, seem identified with

all sea life and adventure from the moment they touch the plank of boat or vessel, she appeared born to rule and glory amid the perils of old Ocean.

As she looked forward into the driving gale, a steady lambent light shining out of her clear dark eyes, Ernest Neuchamp thought he could trace more of the enjoyment that fearless natures extract from danger than of even reasonable apprehension in the girl's whole mien and bearing.

'Well, if we are to go down to the shades below,' thought he, 'no one appears to have more than a very slight objection to the cruise; Jack and myself, as being mere landsmen, alone excepted. Well, perhaps our luck will pull us through this time.'

As if in response to his unspoken half-thought, half-prayer, Paul Frankston broke the silence by saying with a different tone in his voice from its last intonation, 'By George! I believe poor little *Haidée* will do it yet. Yonder's the point, and I think we shall just be able to slip into the inner cove. Antonia darling, what are you thinking about?'

'I was thinking of my mother,' said the girl dreamily, as with an effort she changed her position, and reverted to an everyday expression of face and manner. 'I wonder if people know one another at once in the spirit world. Papa! I think I must begin to put a check upon your boat-sailing tastes, or you must get a Kanaka crew that can't be drowned. You are a little too venturous even for *me*.'

As the boat glided in towards the Morahmee pier, and one by one thankfully exchanged the wet and slippery planks for the solid stonework, the sky darkened yet again, and the storm in its might swept over the angry

waste of waters outside of the sheltered nook as if a fresh blast had been unchained among the far south ice-fields, and had hasted to the gathering where wind and sea revel in their mirth, and where many a tress of mermaiden hair mingles with the trailing ocean sea-flowers.

Mr. Windsor spoke no word until they had nearly reached the garden gate. Then he said respectfully, but firmly, 'I think I've seen all I mean to see of Sydney harbour, sir. I don't care if I never go fishing again, except off a river bank. If any one says there's three heads and not two, I shan't say whether they're right or wrong. The next time I'm a little tired of being John Windsor I shall stumble against Ben Bolt's hind-legs; but no more salt-water pleasure parties. I ain't on. Good-night, sir.'

Miss Frankston did not appear at the dinner-table, but her father and Ernest recompensed themselves for their exertions and anxieties by a comparative liberal use of the wine-cup.

'Stick to that port, my boy,' said the old gentleman; 'one needs a generous wine after our little adventure—and a glass of "hot stopping" won't do any harm afterwards. It was rather a near thing; fact is, I am *not* quite cautious enough, and fancy it like old times, when, with a Maori boat's crew, or these Kanaka fellows, it was next to impossible to be drowned. Drowned! If I'd gone down in my old whaling cruises every time I've been in a stove boat, out of sight of the ship, too, I should have been drowned a dozen times.'

'Are accidents frequent in this port?' said Ernest.

'Well, there are not so many as you might expect, considering the number of yachts and sailing boats; but

still they occur from time to time. You saw the way the southerly gale came on to-night. Well, with an awkward crew such a boat as ours would have been bottom up now as sure as we sit here. There was Colonel Bigges, who used to live at Point Piper; he was always boating, not a bad hand, but of course, no sailor. "Colonel," I said, one day, "you will have a trip too many if you don't mind."

'"What makes you think so?" says he; "I'll sail you for anything you like. I'm going out next Saturday."

'Something made me say, "Then don't take the young ladies out, to oblige me." He had two daughters, nice pretty girls they were, too. Well, for a wonder, he minded what I said. What was the consequence? His boat was upset a mile from shore; he had two menservants in the boat; they were drowned. The Colonel only reached land by the help of his sons, who were splendid swimmers. If the girls had been of the party nothing earthly could have saved them.'

## CHAPTER XVI

The pleasant days wore on until the less pleasant idea began to take shape in Mr. Neuchamp's mind that it had become necessary to consider the route once more. This sojourn in Capua could not be indefinitely prolonged. Either he must go back to Garrandilla or he must make purchase of a station on his own account.

After due consideration of the Garrandilla scheme it became apparent that another year of the routine life which he recalled would be unendurably dull, whereas a new station, his own property, a cattle run—for he was resolved to have no other—would abound in novelties, and above all, in opportunities for carrying out his long-cherished plans of reform.

The only difficulty in his path would be Paul's uncompromising desire to benefit him after his own fashion. For mysterious reasons he had apparently decided that he, Ernest, was not fit to run alone, in a pastoral sense, for another year at least. Mr. Neuchamp steeled himself to attack his provisional guardian on this point on the very next opportunity. He would enlist Antonia upon his side. He would recapitulate the reasons which caused him to consider himself the equal in experience of some pastoralists who had been all their lives in the

country. Surely a man did not come ten thousand miles across the sea to a new, not to say unexplored country, to spend his life in looking on! He would press Paul hard. He would convert him, and then, hey for Eldorado, for Arcadia, for Utopia, with laws and ordinances framed by Dictator Ernest Neuchamp.

While at the club, an institution which became more pleasant in his eyes daily, and where he steadily enlarged the number of his acquaintances, he kept his ears open as to opportunities for buying station property advantageously. He had at one time been fixed in the idea of purchasing the cattle station of Mr. Jermyn Croker, about which that sceptical philosopher and Mr. Frankston had interchanged various pleasantries more or less acidulated. But it so chanced that among the honorary members who made their appearance from time to time at the club, and enlivened or impressed its ordinary society, came a squatter from another colony named Parklands.

With this young gentleman Ernest was much taken, and they soon struck up a strong intimacy. Mr. Parklands was Australian-born, but not on that account to be credited with any deficiency of energy; on the contrary, he possessed so much vigour of body and of mind that if he had degenerated in any way (as is a received theory with certain writers), his progenitors must have been perfect steam-engines. He was well known to have explored a very large proportion of the Australian continent, to have formed, managed, bought, or sold at least a score of cattle and sheep stations. His transactions comprised incidentally thousands of cattle and tens of thousands of sheep. He had recently returned from another colony where he had acquired an immense area

of newly-discovered country. He was on that account, he stated, ready to sell the remnant of his property in New South Wales on favourable terms.

Lal. Parklands was popular. A good-looking, pleasant fellow, went in for everything — billiards, loo, racquets, dinners, theatres, and balls, with the same zest, energy, and enjoyment which he threw into all his business operations. He strongly advised Ernest to 'tackle old Frankston,' as he expressed it, upon the subject of his independence, and to go in for a station on his own hook without delay.

'It isn't because I'm selling out myself that I say it,' he added, 'but the fact is, cattle are as low as they can possibly be, and the next change *must* be a rise. What do you say, Croker?' he asked of that gentleman, who now lounged up. 'You have had something to do with lowering the people's spirits about their stock. If you'll come to Queensland with me next time I want to buy there, I'll pay your expenses.'

'It is apparent,' replied that gentleman, 'that somebody is sure to swindle Neuchamp, and you may as well do it as any one else. I thought I was to have the honour, from what old Frankston said, but I suppose you have made highly-coloured representations after the manner of cornstalks.'

'You are fatally wrong, as usual, Jermyn. I've made a pot of money out of Rainbar, and if Neuchamp buys it and does as well, he'll be able to go back to Europe as a successful colonist in no time.'

'If he takes Mr. Parklands as his model in speculation, management, and conversation, he *must* succeed in everything he undertakes,' said Mr. Croker with ironical approbation.

'Come and have some sherry, old Bitters,' said Mr. Parklands cheerfully, 'and then I'll thrash you at billiards. Never saw an Englishman I couldn't give points to yet. Can't lick us.'

Roused by this national reflection, Mr. Croker offered to play for anything he chose to name, and Ernest betook himself to Morahmee. He had determined to open the parallels without delay.

Full of this noble resolution, Mr. Neuchamp only waited until Antonia had departed from the dining-room to commence the momentous project.

'I begin to feel,' said he artfully, 'that my holiday is drawing to a close. I don't think I ever enjoyed town life thoroughly before. But one can't always be on furlough. I must join my regiment—must be off to the bush again.'

'What's the hurry?' said Mr. Frankston. 'Nothing much ever goes on at a station until the cold weather sets in. You will find Garrandilla wretchedly dull after club-dinners, ball-going, boat-sailing, and all the rest of it. Even the verandah here is considerably better of a hot evening than those rascally slab huts.'

'You have been a sailor, Mr. Frankston,' said Ernest, 'and you know that when the sailing day comes, and the wind is fair, Jack must get on board. I don't suppose you find Captain Carryall would make much allowance for lagging.'

'No, faith. He would need to be a smart fellow to stand before Charley if he kept him humbugging about when the bark was empty and the whaling gear in trim. But you are not shipped as an A.B. anywhere as yet. Make the most of your young life, Ernest, my boy—it won't come twice.'

'There is a time for all things,' rejoined Mr. Neuchamp, who had small reverence for play in the abstract; 'I came to Australia principally for work, and I shall be uneasy until I am fairly in harness. But without beating about the bush, I am impatient to purchase a place of my own, and unless you are inexorably averse to the step, in which case I should give in, I feel the strongest desire to make a start on my own account.'

'Why won't you be content to sail by my orders for a while?' said Paul, much disturbed. 'If you knew how many young fellows I have seen ruined all for the want of a little delay, for want of following the caution I have given you, you would not be in such a hurry to risk your fortune on a throw.'

'But consider,' said Ernest, perceiving, as he thought, a slight sign of compromise in Paul's candid face, 'I am not exactly like other young fellows, with the same intentions. I have had in reality more experience in the time of my novitiate than they have had in double the period. I have had road work, station work, sheep and cattle management. I have had, from peculiar circumstances, more than ordinary advantages of practical teaching, and I do myself consider that unless I am duller than ordinary, I may be trusted to manage a moderate-sized cattle station, if you will help me with your advice in the purchase.'

'Well, I don't know,' said Paul, passing through into the verandah, and lighting the cigar of reflection, 'I don't know but that, as you say, you have had rather more luck than common in your apprenticeship. You have been before the mast, too, as we say on board ship, and that is a great help. You are as steady as a church. That's all to the good, no doubt. But what I am afraid

of is a sudden turn in prices—stock can hardly be lower, to be sure. Well, well—you can only risk it. But I don't want to see you, as I have seen many a good fellow, lose his money and the best years of his life, and either die, go to the devil, or settle down to the banishment of an overseer's berth.'

'Like poor old Geoffrey Hasbene,' said Ernest; 'I don't think I could quite endure that, though the old fellow is resigned enough.'

'I remember him well enough,' said Paul; 'it's a good while since I heard his name. I have seen him ruffling it with the best, and the owner of a good station. He was not very fast either.'

'And what ruined him?'

'Partly bad luck, partly a careless, easy-going disposition. He thought more of his house, his stables, and his garden than he did of his stock, and that was the end of it. Mind you take warning by him.'

'I hope I shall—but now that you think I may really make an attempt to fly off the nest, might we not settle something about the probability of a purchase to-night?'

'Yes—perhaps—yes,' answered Paul, seating himself with a resigned and gloomy air. 'I suppose you have heard of a place or two at the club. There's a good deal of business done there. Has Jermyn Croker said anything to you further?'

'Scarcely, but a young squatter named Parklands has a place that seems suitable; he appears a nice fellow enough.'

'Oh! young Parklands—humph! Very nice boy—quite sharp enough, but I don't suppose could let you in very extensively. Well, I'll inquire to-morrow; better

leave that part of it to me. I'll see about Croker's place also. Plenty of time. Market full of sellers, and very few buyers. Cash very scarce. But that's all in your favour. Antonia!'

'Here, papa,' said that young lady, joining them. 'What is the matter? has anything happened, that you look so serious?'

'Well, that's as it may be; Ernest here is bent upon buying a station at once, and I have been trying to show him the prudence of waiting.'

'But he can't wait years and years,' said Antonia, taking, to Mr. Neuchamp's great joy, her powerful aid to his side of the suit. 'I don't think *you* would have done it either, you impetuous old dear; didn't some one run away to sea like a naughty boy, and come back in a ship of his own—eh?'

'And suppose I did, you saucy puss, didn't I run the risk of being drowned, starved, burned, roasted alive, and all sorts of deaths; and if I had a son, I should think it my duty to warn him against the sea, as the worst profession in the world.'

'And he would think it his duty to go in spite of you. Not that Mr. Neuchamp would do anything contrary to your advice, I am sure,' said Antonia with a becoming blush, 'but I think he is wise in wishing to have a place of his own, and begin life in earnest. Besides, everybody says a cattle station is so pleasant, I almost think I could manage one myself.'

'Pity they should be so far from Sydney, or you might come and try,' said Ernest, with a grateful inflection in his voice. 'Waratah would distinguish herself in a camp, I feel sure.'

'I daresay we should do nearly as well as certain

—hem—English people,' said she mischievously. 'I have always thought from what I have heard that life on a cattle station must be quite the romance of the bush. There is a sort of Bedouin flavour about it, with a necessity for good horsemanship that would fascinate me if I were a man.'

'Go and play something, like a darling,' said the old man. 'I feel a little like my namesake in the Bible—Saul, I mean—as if music could conjure the evil spirit out of me.'

It was finally settled, therefore, on that fateful evening, that Mr. Frankston should inquire about the station which Mr. Parklands had for sale, and decide whether it or that of Mr. Jermyn Croker would be the better investment.

The preliminary was carried out with business-like precision. Mr. Frankston called upon the cheerful Parklands and the desponding Croker and extracted from each, their separate temperaments notwithstanding, the area of the runs, the number, age and sexes, and condition of the cattle, and many other particulars, including the lowest price, necessary to a true and just knowledge of the bargain. He, besides this, set on foot inquiries among those of his numerous constituents who happened to be neighbours, and finally, after all these precautions, told Ernest that he thought Parklands' place seemed the cheaper, and that when it was formally placed under offer he had better go and inspect it.

The negotiations having proceeded to this desirable length, Mr. Neuchamp's satisfaction was unbounded. He saw himself placed in the position which he had long coveted, and pictured day-dreams. He would be a territorial magnate, having the right to rule over a region

larger than the whole county wherein his paternal estate was situated. If he could not impose new laws he could justly administer the old ones. Visions of improved breeds of cattle, of a different method of treating the station hands, of developing the capabilities of the run, of making a fortune in a few years, and revisiting England. All these achievements rendered possible by that first bold step in actual colonisation, the purchase of a run, passed through his brain, with the lightning-like rapidity that was wont to characterise such mental evolutions, but which had of late been more infrequent. He did not confide these plottings against the peace of the district which he was to invade to Antonia. It was not from any decline of sympathetic friendship, but chiefly because of late that young lady, now ever ready to approve of his wish to begin upon his own responsibility, seldom approved of his projects in advance of the age or of Australian ordinary bush customs, which she maintained had been formed by very shrewd and successful men.

It was necessary that Mr. Parklands and Mr. Neuchamp should meet at the station, so that he himself should be able to exhibit its special advantage. But that gentleman had far too many engagements to permit of his starting off at once upon this particular errand.

It was therefore arranged that, on a certain date, Ernest should make his appearance at a far inland township named Bilwillia, where he would meet Mr. Parklands, who by that time would have 'come across' from the Burra-warra-nonga, or some such easily pronounced locality, which he was compelled to visit regarding the approval of a small lot of ten thousand store cattle and fifty thousand wethers, under offer to him for the Melbourne market.

As nothing was to be gained by immediate departure, Mr. Neuchamp availed himself of this unexpected holiday with unrestrained satisfaction and enjoyment. He feasted upon his favourite authors and upon the newer publications which he was enabled to procure in Sydney, thanks to the excellent public and private libraries. Antonia and he renewed their literary labours and criticisms; and that young lady immortalised herself and completely subjugated Jack Windsor, by making a water-colour sketch of Ben Bolt in an attitude of mingled fear, wrath, and desperation, when unexpectedly confronted with a German band. It was Mr. Windsor's deliberate conviction, emphatically expressed, that 'a young lady who could take off a horse like that—the dead image of him—could do anything.' In truth, horse and man formed, at the moment, a study for an artist. The former with glaring eye, open nostril, sudden arrest of action, and capacity for the wildest outbreak; the latter sitting watchful, statuesque, centaur-like, a personification of equestrian strength and grace.

As the distance to Bilwillia was great, and its reputation unfavourable in the matter of horse-flesh, Ernest determined not to risk the safety of Osmund, whom he left in snug quarters near Sydney.

Mr. Windsor, much to his disappointment, received news of the illness of his mother, the only relative in the world, as he had often stated to Ernest, for whom he possessed a grain of affection. He was more strongly moved by the sudden announcement of her being sick unto death than Mr. Neuchamp thought possible.

'I don't half fancy,' he said, 'sloping and leaving you to go and take delivery of the place all alone by yourself, sir; and they say Mr. Parklands knows a thing or

two. However, he's an off-handed chap, and the best thing you can do is to leave the whole jimbang in his hands altogether. If you go barneying about calves, or counting horses that's give in, he'll best ye, as sure as you're born. So your dart is to say you don't know nothin' about cattle, and drop him in for the drafting out calves under age, and all them sorts of things. Then, as he's a gentleman, he's bound to give you a show. I ought to be along with you, I know. But I haven't seen my poor old mother for five years good, and I *must* go, if I was never to make a rise again.'

Jack departed, but he somehow found time to call at Walton's inn on his way to Appin, where his old mother lived and where he had spent his childhood. Ben Bolt had but little breathing time once clear of Sydney streets, and that wild steed of the desert was sensible of a decidedly quickened circulation as he was pulled up in the inn yard, and turned into a stall after a hurried and headlong manner.

As Mr. Windsor passed the door of the inn, he observed an immense quadruped hung up at the posts, which, but for the saddle and bridle, might have been taken for a strayed waggon-horse. The length of the stirrup-leathers conveyed to a bushman's intelligence the fact that the rider of this Gargantuan steed was an individual of unusual length of limb.

Passing quietly into the bar, and thence into a small parlour devoted to the family and particular friends of the host, he discovered the old couple, Miss Carry, and a stranger, whom he immediately associated with the charger aforesaid and with the district of the Hawkesbury.

'Well, Mr. Windsor, and who'd have thought of seeing

you?' said Mrs. Walton. 'Have you and Mr. Neuchum —and a nice gentleman he be, surely—been in Sydney all this time? And where are you leaving for now?'

'We've been in Sydney all the time, and a very jolly place it is, Mrs. Walton,' said Jack, answering the old woman with his tongue and Carry's quick glance with his eyes. 'Mr. Neuchamp's just going up the country to look at a cattle run, and I'm going home to Appin for a short spell.'

'What are you going to do there?' said Carry; 'I thought you went everywhere with the young gentleman?'

'My poor old mother's very bad,' said Jack, looking rueful, 'and I must be home to-night, some time or other; but I don't think anything else would have kept me from going up with the master, to see him all right with this new station as he's going to buy.'

'Do you—live—at—Appin?' said the stranger young man, taking about a minute for the enunciation of each word, and speaking in a drawling, though not nasal, monotone.

'When I'm at home, which is about once in five years, I do,' answered Jack. '*You* live on the Hawkesbury, and haven't ever been far from the river, I'll swear.'

'So I do, at Rooty Hill Farm, Nepean Point,' said the New Hollander with a smile, which broke first upon the edge of the round plump face and gradually spread over it like the eddy in a pond. 'How—did—you—come—to—know?'

'By the look,' said Jack coolly; 'they don't grow such men anywhere else in the colony, except on the Hawkesbury flats. My name's Jack Windsor. What's yours, old nineteen stun?'

'I ain't nineteen stun, I'm only seventeen,' said the youthful giant, whose voice, however, did by no means correspond with his stature, being mild and small of timbre. 'My name's Harry Homminey, and I'll back our land to grow more corn to the acre, let alone pumpkins, than any farm this side of the Blue Mountains.'

'Like enough,' answered Jack indifferently. 'Shouldn't wonder if you took to pumpkins very kind when you was young. They're great feeding stuff. But your Windsor and Richmond farms is only handfuls after all. How many acres have you got?'

'A hundred and thirty-two,' said the Netherlander, with just pride, 'and never a tree or a stump on it.'

'Well, what's that?' demanded the denizen of the waste. 'Why, a child can take up three hundred and twenty acres in the bush anywhere. I wouldn't be bothered with land unless I had a whole section to begin with.'

'It's a deal better than no land at all; and that's about what you have, I expect,' said the agriculturist, gradually coming to the opinion and belief that Mr. Windsor was disposed to disparage him and his fat acres before Carry Walton.

'Never mind what I have, and keep a civil tongue in your head,' said Jack wrathfully; 'I'll give that round face of yours such a pasting that they will not know you from a Lower Narran man, only by your weight, when you go home. But I won't be cross to-night, and the poor old mother dying for all I know. Good-bye, Mrs. Walton; good-bye, Carry. I must be off.'

Mr. Windsor departed into the night and they saw him no more, but I am strongly of opinion that he managed to telegraph something to Carry before he gained his saddle, and if it meant unalterable affection as she under-

stood it, whether it was the automatic process, or Morse's, who shall say?

Certain it is that she returned to the room with a serene countenance, and listened apparently with intentness to the somewhat uninteresting conversation of the man of maize and pumpkins, who eventually mounted his massive charger and trampled along the highway towards the rich levels of Nepean Point.

Mr. Neuchamp was so extremely anxious to make a commencement upon the foundations of his own experience and management that he left Sydney a week or two before the actual time necessary to reach the township of Bilwillia, where he was to make rendezvous with Mr. Parklands. He purchased for himself a befitting hackney, and, not having Jack Windsor's aid, was beguiled into the possession of a stiff, short-legged cob, which his English tradition led him to believe would be the exact animal for a long journey and indifferent keep. Having gone part of the way by rail, he managed to reach the unromantic and extremely hot township of Bilwillia more than three days before Parklands could by possibility arrive, unless under the highly improbable supposition that he had more time than he knew what to do with.

Mr. Neuchamp was, as we have had before occasion to explain, by no means destitute of resources. If there was any interest whatever to be extracted from a locality, he was a likely man to discover and avail himself of it. But he afterwards confessed that he then and there felt more nearly reduced to the unphilosophical and indefeasible position of utter dulness than he could have believed possible.

For if any place could possibly combine extremest degrees of isolation, monotony, dreariness, and depressing

discomfort, that place was Bilwillia. It straggled around the edge of a sombre watercourse, the ditchlike banks of which dropped perpendicularly through the clay, as if dug by some savage engineer centuries since. Around, anear, afar, all was plain and sky. The arid landscape was as boundless, monotonous, as the sea. The salsolaceous plants, within ten feet of the unbarked pine-posts of the rude verandah, were identical in appearance with every plant for a hundred leagues. Hill nor tree nor stone was there within a square of a thousand miles.

There were no books; no newspaper, save the *Bourke Banner*, a fortnight old, containing sundry local incidents, a short leading article, and a lengthy advertisement of Holloway's Pills.

On the fourth day, about the exasperating period of noon, when the 'blue fly sung in the pane,' and all the slow torture of Mariana in the moated grange transposed to southern latitudes seemed to be in process of representation, Mr. Neuchamp, to his excessive delight, made out two separate cortèges arriving from different directions. Both comprised mounted men and spare horses, and either of them might well be the long-expected Parklands. They were plainly steering across the wide plain for the Bilwillia Inn.

The first cavalcade was headed by an unusually tall athletic-looking personage riding a well-bred powerful horse, which evidently made little of his somewhat unfair weight. A sharp-looking elfish black boy and a stockman, at some distance behind, drove several spare animals, including a packhorse, upon the tracks of their leader. As they arrived at the inn, the gentleman in advance hung up his horse and walked into the house, while his attendants proceeded to unsaddle the whole troop.

Almost immediately after the full and careful observation of this party had been concluded by Mr. Neuchamp, rendered desperate by long abstinence from decent society, the second group gradually 'came up from the under world,' like a strange sail, and disclosed the form of a charioteer, with an attendant and spare horses. The driving was like unto that of the son of Nimshi, whom, in the matter of pace, Mr. Parklands resembled. And that energetic and punctual personage it proved to be.

'How are you, Neuchamp?' he called out cheerily, jumping down from an express waggon with a driving seat. 'Splendidly punctual, are we not? Had to come sixty miles yesterday, and five-and-thirty this morning. Can't lick us!'

'It was very good of you,' said Ernest most sincerely, 'to make a push. I do not know what I should have done if I had had to wait another day here.'

'You don't mean to say you came here before yesterday?' cried Mr. Parklands in tones of horror and amazement.

'I came three days ago, I am sorry to say.'

'Three days!' groaned Parklands, 'in this cursed hole. I wonder you didn't hang yourself, or go on the spree. But Englishmen never do that till they have been three years out from home.'

'Three years!' said Ernest, rather amused. 'Then there is a possibility of my taking to inebriety in course of time. It is rather alarming!'

'I have known many a good fellow take to it. All the same, I shouldn't say it was much in your line though, in three years or thirty. But didn't I see a tremendous long fellow go into the house, just as those other horses came up?'

'There was a very tall man at the head of yonder party,' said Ernest, looking over at the black boy and his companion, who was lighting a fire and preparing to cook. 'He is now in the hotel.'

'Aymer Brandon for a thousand!' said Mr. Parklands excitedly. 'A very old friend of mine, and the best fellow going. I suspect he has been over to his runs, on the Warrego. I'll soon lug him out.'

With this he dashed into the inn, and shortly reappeared in company with the tall gentleman, who, indeed, only required to be seen once to be easily recognised in future.

Mr. Aymer Brandon was presently introduced with great and joyous *empressement* by Mr. Parklands, who hung about him with schoolboy abandon. He was so considerably above six feet in height that Mr. Neuchamp and his friend, both well-built, middle-sized men, looked abnormally short beside him. Broad-shouldered, deep-chested, strong-limbed, his vast symmetrical frame seemed equally adapted to feats of strength or of activity.

'We are in luck, Neuchamp; Brandon happens to be going down to one of his stations below Rainbar, and we can join forces—that is horses—and tool down luxuriously, four-in-hand. Can't lick us! I had a presentiment we should come out double sixes when I started.'

Mr. Neuchamp thought it would be most pleasant travelling.

'You see, your cob can go with the spare horses, which the boys will drive after us. Couldn't improve on the caravan if we'd planned for a month.'

Ernest would have modified his anticipation of comfort had he been aware that the larger proportion of the horses depended upon for this rapid and efficient journey-

ing were, at that very moment, wholly unbroken to harness, having, so to speak, never seen a collar.

But this uncertainty of the future was as yet hidden from him, and the whole party proceeded to lunch, which, in consequence of much exhortation, with promises, and even threats, from Mr. Brandon and his friend, was, with the help of the omnipotent bitter beer of Tennant, by no means to be scorned in the wilderness.

'What's your waggon like, Sparks?' queried Mr. Brandon privately.

'Slap-up!' answered he with confidence. 'There's no brake; but that won't matter, as two of the horses have been in harness before, somewhere. We'll do the hundred miles to Rainbar in two days comfortably.'

'Nothing more complete could be hoped for on the Darling,' pronounced his friend calmly, 'so that's settled. I subscribe the black boy and five horses, which we can break in on the road. I hope the I. P. (intending purchaser) is a good plucked one, or he is like to turn back before reaching Rainbar, if he journeys with us in the waggon.'

An early start was arranged for next morning. Accordingly the half uplifted disc of the red sun of the desert irradiated the whole party on the farther bank of the river fully equipped for the road.

Aymer Brandon held the ribbons, while Parklands took the box-seat, in order to be ready in case of a complication with the scratch team. Mr. Neuchamp sat behind in company with Tom Fuller, a Rainbar stockman and past-master in smashes of every kind, sort, and description on wheel or in saddle, on land or water, mountain or plain. The black boy, Eachin, rode in charge of the spare horses, amongst which was turned Mr.

Neuchamp's Sydney cob. One of the unbroken horses was considerately placed in the near wheel, the other in the off lead. It being evident that all precautions had now been taken, Mr. Brandon sang out 'Let go!' to the volunteers who had assisted at the ticklish business of putting to, and with a shout, a double-thonger, half a dozen wild plunges, and an innocuous kick, the team settled down on the utterly perfect, firm, sandy road to something like racing speed.

There was little conversation for the first mile. Without a brake, all that could be done was to hold the team straight, shooting the gullies fairly as they came. Ever and anon, as a bar touched his hocks, the off leader kicked gaily over the traces, but finding the outer side yet more uncomfortable, kicked back again with discretion beyond his years.

Three miles had been swallowed up ere the team steadied ever so slightly. Then Brandon got his pull at them.

'Good travelling, Neuchamp?' said Mr. Parklands. 'Do the journey easy by to-morrow night. The day after I'll show you the finest lot of cattle in Australia—all reds, whites, and roans. Can't lick 'em!'

'Are they quiet?' asks Mr. Neuchamp, as a vision of back country cattle blacks and brindles, which he mentally vows to improve off the face of the earth, crosses his brain.

'Quiet?' queries Parklands derisively, 'why, you can't kick 'em out of your way.'

'I am truly glad to hear that,' says Mr. Neuchamp heartily; 'quiet cattle are so much pleasanter to draft.'

A ten-mile stage, at the highly meritorious pace alluded to, having been slipped over, the monotony of

Australian steppe-travelling was varied by the introduction of two of Brandon's troop. They were, comparatively,

> Wild as the wild deer, and untamed,
> By 'trace and collar' undefiled.

The first introduced was a grand-looking old black horse, with a superabundance of pluck and one hip down. He was substituted for the off-side leader, who was turned over to Eachin. The alteration was effected in five minutes, and old Darkie sailed off as though he had been carefully coached since colthood. This state of affairs was obviously too good to last. Not accustomed to winkers, the veteran, catching his toe in a root, went down like a shot. Now occurred a first-class complication.

'Total wreck, with loss of all hands,' concludes Mr. Neuchamp.

Not so. Parklands and Jim Fuller are down almost as soon as Darkie, and fasten on the horses like bull terriers in a rat-pit, while Aymer Brandon sits calmly in his place, and delivers his orders with the imperiousness of the skipper whose mainmast has gone by the board.

This was the situation: when Darkie fell the team was doing ten miles an hour. The wheelers swept over him, and he was brought up by the fore-axle of the waggon. Both check-reins were carried away and the lead bars broken. The near leader dashed round the back of the coach, where he was pulled up with a round turn by the strong arm of Mr. Brandon, who was engaged, as to his whip-hand, in rib-roasting Darkie to make him 'come out of that.'

'Here, Jem!' he sang out, 'freeze on to this brute

behind while I make that three-cornered calamity come out of his earth.'

Darkie, finding his position under the waggon becoming too hot, emerged dexterously, and stood upright under the off-wheeler, raising that unsuspecting animal's hindquarters upon his back. Having achieved which he awaited the next move, which promptly came in the shape of two terrific double-thongers. Upon this Darkie darted out, and at once commenced to feed till again wanted.

'My dear Parklands,' commenced Mr. Neuchamp, underrating the variety of bush expedients, 'this is indeed unfortunate. I suppose we shall have to camp here until the harness is repaired.'

'Camp!' exclaims Parklands in wild amaze, 'we'll be off in ten minutes. Can't lick us.'

And in good sooth, a pair of spare bars having been rigged, and the checks spliced with bush buckles, within fifteen minutes they *were* once more under weigh and doing their ten knots an hour comfortably.

At two o'clock Toolara, a station which was the property of Mr. Parklands, and distant about seventy miles from Rainbar, was reached; there a good luncheon was secured. At four o'clock start was made to do the remaining twenty miles between them and Gregor's shanty, where the night was to be passed.

At Toolara the party was augmented by a tame dingo, belonging to Mr. Parklands. He was most appropriately named Beelzebub. For, in his own realm, the vast kingdom of this chief, he reigned unequalled.

A magnificent specimen of the Australian dingo, bright orange as to colour with a white ring round the neck, he boasted of long sweeping hair and was feathered

like a Gordon setter. The intelligence expressed by his flag was marvellous, and its language various and comprehensive as that of a semaphore. His face alone, if fate had but permitted the painting of it to Sir Edwin Landseer, would have been well worth a thousand guineas at the Royal Academy. Plainly visible therein were foresight, decision, craft, and self-control, in sufficient quantity to furnish forth a Cabinet Ministry. You could not look upon the calm countenance without feeling a conviction that against all ordinary foes that gifted animal was safe, as Achilles upon the Trojan plain. Like unto the Homeric hero he was invulnerable save in one point, the poisoned bait, that talismanic safeguard which assures the pastoral future of Australia.

To his credit be it stated, Beelzebub did not in any way identify himself with the party, who were, through this discreet conduct, not included in the anathemas he was destined to bring down on his own head. He kept about a quarter of a mile from the road, in a course parallel with the waggon.

Five miles had been travelled when the first victim to his fiendish arts appeared. Norval, leisurely boiling the evening camp kettle, the while watching his flock peacefully nibbling towards the yard, is thunderstruck to see those splendid wethers, filled with salt-bush and water, suddenly sundered as if by a red streak of lightning, and the division farthest from him sent across the plain racing for their lives, with the devil himself whipping in.

Then does that unhappy Gael pursue, with his longest strides and Anglo-Ossianic oaths, but to no purpose. The astute dog-fiend, when the fat-laden flyers had collapsed suddenly and hopelessly, through sheer breathlessness, turns him round, curls his noble flag far over his back,

and, like the famed coyote, 'vanishes through an atmospheric crack.'

This trifling adventure was witnessed by Brandon, Parklands, and Mr. Neuchamp with great interest. The sheep did not belong to them. The dog was fully believed to be a dingo errant, running his diurnal stage of duty. And, in the end, it would conduce to the benefit of the merino interest, as Norval would be roused into a course of spasmodic bait-laying, which possibly might bring a few genuine freebooters off their perches. Aymer Brandon, after a hearty laugh all round and the assertion from Sparks that they 'couldn't lick him,' dropped the whip-cord on to his team and swept away over a splendid salt-bush plain, level as a bowling green, though slightly differing in colour. As they threaded a clump of box, the corpse (apparently) of Beelzebub was descried stretched out under a tree, looking rather more dead than the reality. The crafty one permitted himself to be passed without the motion of a muscle, and was no more seen until a mile or two on, when a cloud of dust, with a red thunderbolt darting to and fro therein, proclaimed the fact that another shepherd was in process of disestablishment.

The short Australian twilight had commenced, when Parklands took the reins to pilot the coach into a deep horse-shoe bend unknown to Brandon, near to the opposite bank of which stood the half-way house. At a nobly undeniable pace did the gallant Sparks tool through the glades of mighty red gum patriarchs, the roots of which, long fed by river springs, deep piercing the soft alluvium, had made them loftier, broader, wider of shade than the fatherland. He had shot more than one polygonum creek, straight and true as an Indian the Saults St. Marie's boiling rapid, when Brandon shouted, 'Where the blazes

are you driving—slap into the river? I can't see how these nags will take a water jump!'

'By Jove!' said the iron-nerved Sparks, as with a clever sweep he came to anchor, the near wheels going several inches over the river bank in the operation, with a drop to the water at an angle of seventy-five or a hundred feet, 'so I am. Jump out, boys. Can't lick us.'

The events of the day had occasionally startled Mr. Neuchamp, but his *sangfroid* won the admiration of Parklands and his friend. He had exhibited no tendency to jump out before he was told; and Brandon was afterwards heard to state his conviction, that if Sparks had charged the Darling four-in-hand with characteristic carelessness of results, Ernest would have simply sat back and kept his chin up, in profound undoubting faith that he would be landed safely upon the opposite bank.

The horses were promptly unharnessed and turned out amidst luxuriant pasture, after which all hands crossed the Great River in Gregor's dug-out to that gentleman's hotel. An apology for the primitive appearance of the place was thought necessary by Parklands, so considerate ever is the outgoing proprietor to the intending purchaser. Ernest assured him that, though slightly inferior to the Royal, he had already, since his arrival in Australia, been lodged more humbly. Having witnessed one another's signature in passable whisky, towels were produced, and the dust of the day consigned to the river.

At ten o'clock P.M. all hands were ordered to bed by Aymer Brandon, in spite of Sparks's desire to describe a lovely damsel whom he had met when last in Sydney. She was his sixteenth engagement, but circumstances had compelled an irrevocable parting. Knowing that another whisky would infallibly bring on a retrospective history

of the other fifteen, Aymer was inexorable and hunted the amorous Parklands to bed, where he was heard to murmur softly, 'Couldn't lick her,' as he dropped off to sleep.

Beelzebub, arising with the lark, promoted the next adventure, as follows: Gregor was out at cockcrow, to kill a sheep for morning chops, but found himself all too late. His fold, a hundred yards from the house, was dog-proof, with the exception of the hurdled gateway. Reaching it, 'all hunger-maddened and intent on blood,' he found another in possession actuated by similar motives. He beheld Beelzebub in the very act of devouring a six-tooth ewe—not the class of sheep usually selected for slaughter. 'Stiffen those blank dingoes!' roared Gregor, 'there goes a note!' Charging wrathfully into the yard, and unconsciously commending himself by name to his enemy, he assaulted the 'Evil One.' The instinct of the latter came primarily into play, thus assaulted unawares, and he sprang at the high slanting poles, all vainly. Not Cerberus himself could have cleared them. This false step was but the weakness of a moment. Logical reasoning, the result of civilised intercourse, reasserted its sway. Calm as Marlborough, he then comprehended the situation with a glance, and proceeded to execute the only strategical movement possible in the very pressing, or rather depressing, condition of the engagement.

Gregor, upon observing his abortive attempt to clear the fence, had rushed to the gate. The crafty one, with an innocent expression of countenance, and his flag curled gracefully over his back, trotted calmly towards him. Gregor timed the dog well, unknowing of his resources, and aimed a kick at him which would have stove in a thirty-ton cutter.

The Napoleon of dingoes, making a feint as if to dash through the gate, stopped abruptly. The harmless boot expended its force and momentum, with some inconvenience to its owner, against the gate-post. Ere a second *coup de pied* could be arranged, Beelzebub glided swiftly through, with his flag erect and waving gently from side to side in token of approval.

At breakfast Gregor gave a thrilling account of the havoc wrought in his flock, and solemnly swore that he had lifted the dog, with one kick, over the high palisades.

Parklands, knowing the culprit and the utter hopelessness of any human effort to strike him without consent, felt no uneasiness. He also forgot to mention that the dog belonged to him. When Gregor was out of earshot Parklands (who was solely a cattle-owner), bursting with pride at the prowess of his pet, offered to lay Mr. Neuchamp a cool hundred that Beelzebub, bar baits, should eat all the sheep on any ordinary station in six months.

Mr. Neuchamp, not having studied the habits and capacity of the Australian dingo sufficiently to warrant his making a book on the subject, declined the wager.

'If I were you, Sparks,' said Brandon, 'the next time I was annexed by a young woman and wished to be off the bargain, I should make her a present of Beelzebub. If the "wily one" would not in a week sever the tenderest domestic ties, I am mistaken in his character. Wouldn't mind even laying him against a mother-in-law.'

An early breakfast of chops, fresh from the slaughtered ewe, a short but exciting voyage in the dug-out, and they espied their 'connecting link,' who was equal to

most occasions, standing with his horses ready for harnessing. Their narrow escape on the preceding night was now plainly legible in the wheel tracks, *just over* the brink of the river bank, and even the reckless Sparks acknowledged it to have been 'a near thing.' Brandon now took the reins, lectured Sparks upon dangerous driving, and spun through the vast umbrageous eucalypti, towards the road.

Neither accidents nor offences occurred during the next twenty-five miles, at the end of which luncheon was spread by the side of a reed-bordered langoon. As they had now entered upon the extensive territory of the Rainbar run, Mr. Parklands caught a horse for himself, as also Mr. Neuchamp's cob, with a view to rounding up an occasional mob of cattle and proving his vaunt as to their unsurpassed breeding and docility.

The opportunity soon occurred. A small lot of some fifty or sixty head appeared about a half-mile from the road. Away went Parklands with Eachin and Mr. Neuchamp backing up. After a sharp ring or two the cattle stood with the horsemen around them. To Mr. Parklands' mortification and Brandon's wild delight, everything being plainly visible from the waggon, a huge coarse-horned, dun-coloured bullock singled out and 'went for' Ernest without more ado. The appearance of the brute was appalling, and his intention so obvious that Mr. Neuchamp did not hesitate to turn and fly across the plain for his life. The cob, though a fair roadster, was not constructed for violent exercise at short notice. He held on gallantly, but *bos ferox* gained perceptibly on him. At the half-mile end his horns were level with the cob's quarters, and Mr. Neuchamp had concluded to throw himself off and trust to the brute's

continuing his mad career, when the cob, feeling that the game was up, stopped short, throwing his rider over his head. The bullock hurled past them with a snort of wrath and defiance, continuing his headlong course over the plain, in search of the first congenial scrub. When Parklands came up Mr. Neuchamp was gazing at his horse, which stood with its legs wide apart panting, with streams of sweat running down his flanks and even his face. His ears were dangling limply, and he looked very much indeed as if he were going to cry.

'Really, Parklands,' said poor Neuchamp, 'if that is a specimen of a Rainbar beast, I can well understand your saying that they will not get out of your way.'

'D—n the brute!' quoth Sparks; 'he does not belong to the run at all. Didn't you see the JS on his quarter? He is one of those infernal scrub-danglers from the Lachlan come across to get a feed. I'll shoot the ill-conditioned wretch if ever I come across him again.'

Upon being assured both by Brandon and Parklands that this was really the state of the case, Ernest continued his inspection of the remainder of the mob, with which he was well satisfied. Not to risk any further *contretemps*, Parklands then suggested a return to the known dangers of the waggon. This also suited the cob, who looked as if he had carried all his friend's money in a race and lost it.

'Ten miles from Rainbar,' sang out Parklands. The words had hardly left his lips when the fore part of the waggon sprang into the air.

'Hang on behind!' shouted Brandon; and another minute saw Sparks and Jem Fuller fasten on to the hind axle, backing for their lives. 'Man the horses,

Eachin! Jem, you cut a straight sapling while we rouse out the saddle-straps for a splice.'

On inspection the pole was found to have snapped about a foot from the fore-carriage, upon which the broken stump, catching the ground, had turned that important part of the mechanism under the waggon, causing the alarming jolt. The pole being 'fished' with a pine sapling and numberless saddle-straps, the remaining ten miles were safely accomplished rather under the hour, with the middle of the mended pole trailing in the dust.

They were heartily welcomed at Rainbar by Mr. Brigalow, the overseer, who produced some good whisky, and with an invention of his own, called a geebung, a fair imitation of soda water was concocted, in which all present drank success to the purchaser.

On the morning after their arrival at Rainbar no time was lost by the restless Parklands, who was astir and alive to the utmost possible extent at daylight. Mr. Neuchamp, too excited to sleep during the night, had fallen asleep before dawn. He had but dozed off, it appeared to him, and now here was Parklands rousing up everybody, catching horses, whistling to the dogs, swearing at the black boys, throwing missiles at Brandon's door, and generally making as much noise as a dozen ordinary people. Where work of any general nature is on foot in the bush, breakfast is the first important stage, being indispensable, as, whatever other meals may be partaken of provisionally or left to chance, human nature urgently cries out for one 'square meal,' *pour commencer*. The cook therefore came in for his share of intimidation and criticism from this terrible early bird.

Eventually the whole party found themselves assembled for breakfast at the comparatively early hour of 5.30 A.M., while through the unglazed open windows they could see the partially filled horse-yard, in which stood every available screw and stock-horse on the place.

'Now, Neuchamp,' commenced Mr. Parklands, only partially arresting the process of deglutition, 'we must come to a decision about the muster. I am bound by the terms of my agreement with old Father Frankston—rather a downy old bird, in spite of his jolly ways and out-and-out dinners—to get in all the herd and count them over to you. I would rather not do it, I confess; not because I'm afraid of my numbers, but it takes time. I have to be in Melbourne in ten days, in Adelaide in three weeks. Besides, it knocks the cattle about. Doesn't it, Aymer?'

'Of course it does,' assented that gentleman; 'but it has an element of safety about it, as far as the purchaser is concerned.'

'No doubt of that; but in cases where the books have been so regularly kept for years, as Brigalow's here, any man can see that he *must* get his numbers if he takes them by the book total, with a decent percentage knocked off for deaths, etc., for fear of accidents.'

'It occurs to me,' interposed Mr. Neuchamp, remembering Windsor's advice, 'that as I have actually no experience in taking over a herd like this, if Mr. Brandon would kindly act for me in the whole matter, I should be happy to leave the delivery in his and your hands, feeling sure that he could arrange it with you, in my interest, better than I could myself.'

'I could have no objection, of course,' said Parklands. 'I think it a very good idea on your part; and though

Aymer is my oldest friend, yet I fancy no one would accuse him of not doing you justice in such a case as this. I don't think they'd tell him so, at any rate.'

'What a lazy beggar you are in small things, Sparks,' said Aymer. 'Why don't you muster the cattle, and have done with it? And why am I to be exalted into the position of your head stockman, and expected to back you up in all kinds of audacious fabrications in which I have no personal interest?'

'Who is lazy now?' sneered Parklands. 'Why can't you oblige Neuchamp and me also; it may be for the last time, for I shall never return from Melbourne alive, if the girls are half as pretty as they used to be. Besides, I give you full power to fix the percentage, inspect the books, knock off the price—anything you like, in fact. As a seller of unparalleled generosity, we can't be licked.'

'I shall feel really grateful, Mr. Brandon,' said Ernest, 'if you will consent to be my arbitrator and friend in the business.'

'Well,' said Brandon, stretching his vast frame and rising slowly from the breakfast-table, 'if both parties combine against me there is nothing but capitulation for it. I surrender. So we may go to work forthwith. There are the books for ten years back—certainly very neatly and regularly kept. Branded, so many; missing, so many; dead, so many; sold, so many. It strikes me, however, that 1 per cent additional might be added to the death-rate.'

'All right, old boy, knock it off,' exclaimed Parklands

'Then, as to the brandings, nothing of course counts under six months. I observe that you and Brigalow had a very fair haul of calves about a month ago. I suppose

none of them came from those outlying Wanilmah cattle of mine? We'll scratch *them* out of the count.'

'You be hanged,' explodes Parklands. 'I believe that old cattle-stealer, Weenham, that *you* call an overseer, is a long way on the debit side with me in the calf line. But scratch them out if you like. I hope you're contented now. I believe you're standing in with Neuchamp, and met accidentally by appointment at Bilwillia to have me.'

'I've not quite done with you yet,' said Brandon calmly, all unheeding of the gradually rising thermometer of Sparks's temper. 'What about those Back Lake cattle? It has just occurred to me that the last camp we saw there two years ago, when I helped you muster, contained an unusual number of "pigmeaters," even for back country. You can't charge our friend full price for them.'

'By Jove!' exclaimed Parklands, 'you're a friend in need. Well, of course we'll make a deduction for them. Though as the country is so splendid out there, and is easily watered by cutting a channel from the river, I——'

'Cost only two thousand pounds,' murmured Aymer.

'Go to blazes! Five hundred more likely,' said the sanguine Sparks. 'Well say a hundred off for "ragers."'

'Must have a hundred and fifty,' placidly pleaded Brandon. 'Think of the danger and anxiety in muster times.'

'You're another!' burst out Sparks, now justly indignant. 'If I take off another penny for anything, may I be——'

'Well, I only want two more stock-horses now,' persisted Brandon; 'nothing here fit to call a horse that you could break your neck off creditably.'

'Where am I to get them, eh?' asked Parklands despairingly.

'Don't mind taking the two wheelers you drove up. Neuchamp will find them handy for practising four-in-hand with—the only fun he'll be likely to get here. And now, as I'm thoroughly exhausted and demoralised by unmasking your villainy, we'll adjourn to lunch. Can't lick us, eh, Sparks.'

'Well, of all the cold-blooded, grasping, unprincipled screws that ever imposed upon a warm-hearted proprietor under the cloak of early friendship, you're the biggest, you old humbug. Mr. Neuchamp, you never made a better bargain in your life, thanks to this long impostor. Let us have lunch on the strength of it; we'll do the arithmetic afterwards, and I shall be able to start at daylight. Can't lick us!'

Somewhat comforted by the notion that he would be able to depart without the enforced delay of a muster, and again commence one of his long and rapid journeys, made with the tireless celerity of a Russian lieutenant with despatches, Parklands ordered and attacked lunch with his usual vigour and determination. Mr. Neuchamp in his turn was shrewd enough to perceive that Brandon, having definitely, though unwillingly, accepted the responsibility of acting for him, had decided with the sternest impartiality between his friend and himself. He felt that equally by this arbitration or by leaving it wholly to Mr. Parklands he would in any case have been a considerable gainer by adopting Jack Windsor's advice, and he felt a lively satisfaction at the successful result.

Lunch having been disposed of, the trio sat down to the calculation, and the lowest attainable number of

cattle, with their ratable money-value per head, having been produced as the result of Aymer Brandon's subtraction and addition, Mr. Neuchamp gave a cheque for the amount, signed with the hitherto unquestioned name of Ernest Neuchamp. In return he received a receipt from Parklands, reciting below that he had hereby purchased the right, title, and license to all those crown lands situated in the county of Oxley, and comprising the runs of Rainbar East and West, Warrah, Banda, North Banda, Back Banda, and Outer Back Banda, with two thousand head of cattle, more or less, branded LP, and the right to all cattle whatever bearing that brand not absolutely proved to be sold or demised by the proprietor or by his orders.

This feat fully accomplished, Mr. Neuchamp was congratulated by both gentlemen upon being the proud possessor of one of the best cattle runs of a very good district, and tolerably cheap too, as he was assured.

'The fact is,' said Mr. Parklands, 'I should never have offered it at this price; but I am going in extensively for a lot of new country upon the Darr, and I want all the cash I can get hold of. It's necessary to buy money, you know, sometimes, and this is a case in point. If things go right, in half a dozen years I shall be able to sell runs by the dozen. Can't lick us!'

## CHAPTER XVII

THERE are several proverbial tests by which a man's directness and liberality of thought may be measured. The dividing of an inheritance has been found to divide for ever near and dear friends. The co-occupation of a house frequently leads to the severing of friendship. A sea-voyage of lengthened duration mostly displays the true nature of the human units, jointly imprisoned, with such alarming clearness that they tacitly agree to avoid each other ever after. But it may be doubted whether any process exceeds in thoroughness of assay the transaction known in Australia as 'giving delivery of a station.'

He who comes forth from that crucial test may, like the man who emerges scatheless from the ordeal of a contested election, plume himself upon wearing armour of proof. Is he inclined to parsimony, the handing over station implements, the unconsidered trifles counted, priced, or hampered up together, will convict or acquit him of the charge. Is he insincere, unscrupulous, careless, liberal, reasonably firm, ordinarily prudent, the purchaser will generally be able for evermore to speak with authority on these points. In the delivery of Rainbar there was perfect openness on either side, and the

more Mr. Neuchamp came to know of the ways of the land the more fully did he understand, and more strongly affirm, that he had been treated in his first purchase with the utmost possible fairness and liberality. Every one had been moderately busy all day. Lunch had been a hurried meal. The latter part of the afternoon Mr. Parklands had devoted to looking after his waggon, packing his traps, and getting together his horses. He did not merely give orders, but thoroughly satisfied himself by actual inspection that no unforeseen obstacle or oversight could, humanly speaking, interfere with his leaving Rainbar at sunrise. While apparently immersed in these details he, however, found time to suggest to the cook that this would be a favourable opportunity for him to 'impress himself,' as in all probability neither he nor Mr. Brandon would dine there again for years to come, if ever. The consequence of which well-timed hint was that a dinner of unparalleled excellence, for salt-bush country, was served at 7 P.M., which Mr. Parklands, who had concluded his labours with just sufficient margin to admit of a swim with Brandon and Mr. Neuchamp in the river, definitely expressed his intention of enjoying to the utmost.

'I must say,' said he, as they sat down to this very creditable effort—the artist as usual might have sung with Lord Richard in the ballad of Alice Brand, 'I am a banished man' (too exclusive sacrifices to Bacchus having rendered metropolitan residence impolitic) 'that I prefer the principal meal to take place at the end of the day.'

'So do I, Sparks, my boy,' said Brandon. 'Industrious people like you and I require all the daylight we can get to energise in. Besides, there is something unrefined in a hearty meal and hot dishes partaken of at mid-day, to

the injury of complexion and delay of business, and the serious damage of digestion, which abides not with anxiety and uncertainty of mind.'

'I thought every one dined early in the bush,' said Mr. Neuchamp, 'though I do not see why it should be an unalterable law.'

'There is no actual necessity for it,' said Aymer. 'It is false economy to the mid-day meal, which should be a light one, to confer upon it that improper dignity and position. I quite agree with Sparks, that the cares of the day should be over before one undertakes so serious a subject as dinner. If it occurs at mid-day how can any one foresee that he may not be dragged away from the cheerful board and subjected to exercise or anxiety of the most violent description? How *can* any digestion so ill treated preserve its equanimity? and if one digests not, then is happiness fled for ever.'

'I feel a convert all over,' said Ernest. 'How capital this teal is; wherever did the cayenne come from?'

'Always carry some,' answered Brandon; 'it is like tea and tobacco, and bills of exchange, very portable. I like work'—here he slightly expanded his vast chest and raised his sinewy fore-arm—'but I may add, with even less risk of being contradicted by my friends, that I appreciate comfort.'

'*That's* true; in fact nothing could be truer,' assented Mr. Parklands; 'as to the work, you can do two men's share either at work, love, or fighting when you're regularly cornered. You and I used to hunt better in couples when we were youngsters. Couldn't lick us, eh, old man? Remember when we thrashed those five fellows with the store cattle that came ravaging through the run, and took the cattle from them?'

'We were boys then,' answered Aymer with a grave smile, 'now we're men and magistrates both; such escapades don't become us. But we had a few trifling adventures in the old days when we were taking up the Behar country.'

'That reminds me of the blacks,' said Mr. Parklands; 'they were awfully bad there. I'm leaving you a capital brace of niggers, Mr. Neuchamp, first-class hands with cattle. I forgot them when Brandon was making his unprincipled reduction; they're worth fifty pounds each to any man.'

'You would have made a splendid Southerner, Sparks,' said Brandon, who, dinner having been concluded, had withdrawn to the fireside and lighted a capacious richly-coloured meerschaum. 'What an eye you could have had for the points of a good field hand, not to mention those of a likely Octoroon. You're too fond of dealing, however, to have stuck properly to your hereditary bondsmen. I can fancy your swapping Uncle Tom, Aunt Chloe, and the rest of them for a gang of half-broken plantation hands, with a trotting horse thrown in for boot.'

'Well, I like variety, I own,' confessed Sparks, 'and can't bear sticking to the same style of country and stock for ever. But human beings make some difference in the calculation, though I don't know that *you* go so far, if all tales are true.'

'What do you mean, Sparks?' inquired Brandon, with a slightly roused intonation.

'Well, all the country heard that you and Lorton shot them like crows when you took up Tthoondula, after they had hunted the Dawsons off it the year before.'

'There was only one man shot the whole time I was

there,' replied Brandon, 'and he was killed in an attempt to take him prisoner by Bothwell and his native police. He had nearly tomahawked Will Lorton, and but for accidental assistance would have had his scalp, figuratively, to a dead certainty.'

'How far was that from here?' asked Mr. Neuchamp.

'Fully eight hundred miles, so that there is no chance of your falling in for a blood feud. None of the slain man's kin could get here, if the life of the whole tribe depended upon it.'

'And was it absolutely necessary to put the aboriginal you speak of to death?' asked the philanthropic Ernest.

'It was necessary to punish any black,' replied Brandon, 'who raised his hand with intent to slay against any white man in that district and at that time. Without such a penalty implicitly carried out, the country would have become uninhabitable.'

'Suppose we have a glass of whisky,' proposed Parklands; 'this is my last evening, and we must drink prosperity to Neuchamp, and success to all his undertakings. Here are the materials; and now, Aymer, I suggest that you give us the story of the man-hunt, where you were in at the death. Neuchamp is dying to hear it, and if you don't tell me, I shall never leave off spreading reports that you and Lorton killed a whole tribe in cold blood—men, women, and children.'

'There are only two courses open to me that I perceive,' answered Brandon: 'I must either knock you down and so trample out this slander, or tell the story my own way. I have a foolish feeling of compunction as to the former proceeding, so I may possibly gratify your curiosity. As Mickey Free says, the night is young and drink plenty.'

Mr. Neuchamp, though a foe to excess, did not disdain

a moderate allowance of 'old spirits' from time to time. He was particularly led on this eventful night to bear himself in a sociable and sympathetic manner. There was no chance of work being done or thought of till morning light. So he drew up his chair, filled his glass, and looked fixedly at the calm features of Aymer Brandon, who, much pressed and entreated, at length commenced his tale of years long past.

'We had taken up Tthoondula, Will Lorton and I, only the year before, and we had fixed to commence our first shearing on the 20th of August. It was the 15th, so no time could be wasted. Small parties of shearers were camped by the edge of the long black gum-shrouded lagoon which had given its name to the run. No one could have imagined that the dark deep water was in reality transparently clear. The sombre hue produced by the illusion of a mud stratum, and the swart shadows cast by the huge eucalypti which lined its banks, caused one involuntarily to recall "the dark tarn of Auber," while as the pall of swift-speeding night fell heavily o'er the scene, it needed but little fancy to re-create the "ghoul-haunted wood and of Weir." Slowly on that eve dropped the sun behind the rugged "divide" which separates the Paroo and Warrego, leaving the rosy-lipped hills smiling adieu till the morrow. The frown on the face of the mulga-studded lowlands deepened, and the wrinkles harshly marked by many a tributary creek bore witness to its sorrow for the dying day.

'The weather was simply perfect. We anticipated a successful shearing. The mornings were crisp as lettuces, the succeeding portion of the day exhilarating to the degree of making conscious existence a pleasure of the highest order. Summer, with a register of 120 in the

shade, would have been forgotten but for the dry harsh wool and the sand banks on the sheep's back. We were in high spirits nevertheless. If the wool was worth little we were separated by a thousand miles from our bills. Our bankers could only get at us by letter, and we were spared the discontent patent on the faces of those officials when the balance is on the wrong side of the ledger.

'By Jove, when I think of those early days, Sparks, how sanguine we must all have been to see anything but ruin, writ large, in such investments. The only sheep one could buy were very indifferent as to the quality, size, and constitution. They had been lambed twice a year for the purpose of stocking up new country, and it was chiefly on paper that the splendid frontages looked in any manner or shape tempting. The calculation had been based on Riverina scales of labour, outlay, and profit. Once on the ground the "dead horse" stood confessed. How often have you and I seen a healthy, high-couraged youngster start out for these fascinating territories of limitless mulga-downs, full-freighted with hope, flattery, coin, and courage — friendship, with delusive crayon, sketching golden futures, cautious capital proffering loans with both hands. At the end of five years returns a subdued, bronzed, resolved-looking man, with signs of dust from the road of Time "upon brow and beard." His pecuniary correspondents, who, to say truth, have not come off scatheless, scowl upon him. But his "own people" and his true old friends receive the scarred and desert-worn Crusader with loving words and open arms. With these tarries he, till again the trumpet peals for another tilt with the veiled antagonist of the future.'

'Devilish fine, old man. You're a most sentimental

buffer after the second tumbler. Can't be licked, in fact —but how about the nigger? I wonder you had the heart to shoot him—two poetical cusses like you and Lorton. Why didn't you give him a moral pocketankercher?'

'I appeal to Mr. Neuchamp for protection from your coarse attacks,' quoth Aymer with mock dignity. 'Perhaps, after all, this incident is of trifling interest.'

'My dear Mr. Brandon,' cried out Ernest, terrified at the idea of losing a tragedy, 'I sincerely trust that you will not think of withdrawing your promise to give us this deeply interesting tale. I feel painfully curious to hear the sequel.'

Thus adjured, and with a withering look at Parklands, Mr. Brandon proceeded.

'We devoted the next few days at Tthoondula to fixing the spade-press — that friendly adjunct to the pioneer-squatter's humble woolshed, and topping up the brush yard at the equally primitive washpool. I decided upon taking charge of the shed, leaving the lavatory to my partner.

'It would be difficult to choose the easier task. Will was to command a lot of half-tamed naked Myalls, as yet hardly to be trusted, reprisals being still freely indulged in on that frontier territory between the blacks and itinerant station hands. The shearers were composed of the human scum always to be found floating near the border of civilisation, like the rubbish forced before an advancing flood. It was no unusual occurrence to have the full complement of men in the morning, and in the afternoon, upon the unexpected arrival of an inspector of police, the shearing board would be deserted. All but a brace "cachéd" in the mulga. They showed

up in the inverse proportion, of course, to the fact of their being "wanted." Not that the native police troubled themselves much about them. But a criminal hides from a policeman instinctively, as doth the young wood-duck from the sportsman. All this makes the management of this class of men the more difficult, as, if you sack them in your righteous wrath, you can by no possibility get others.'

'Cannot the blacks be taught to shear?' inquired Mr. Neuchamp. 'They are the natural labourers of the land —and *ads ripti glebæ* too, as from what I learn they dare not leave their own district from fear of other tribes.'

'It is weary work shearing with them. They are neat but painfully slow, and constitutionally lazy. The Anglo-Saxon is made up of faults, not to say vices, but there is no worker on the earth's surface like him.'

'Can't be licked,' murmured Sparks contemplatively, removing his pipe and mixing himself another whisky. 'Tell me when you've finished shearing and want help to load up.

'On the 19th,' continued Brandon calmly, all unheeding Mr. Parklands' practical arrangement of the narrative, 'all was ready. Will Lorton was to commence washing early next morning. They did not begin with the usual flock. But in that land "the most unaccustomed thing is custom."

'At the dawn-bird's cry from the aged trees, I sang out "All aboard!" and waking Will, we both rushed, robed in our blankets, to the lagoon, for a plunge into its sad-coloured waters, to emerge smoking in reactionary glow, and feeling fit to fight for a king's ransom.

'Then, habited in the primitive garb of the far north

land, Will made for the blacks' camp, to see his Myalls off to the wash-pool.

'On Tthoondula dwelt a grizzled, savage-looking old warrior, called by the whites "Hutkeeper." His duty was to tend the home flock. He was a chief in his tribe, and did not render himself conspicuous by wearing clothes. The English language had proved too difficult for his limited intelligence. He received food and tobacco for his slight services.

'I had noticed one or two marked traits of savagery about Hutkeeper, and had warned Will not to trust the old ruffian. His mortal enemy at the home station was the cook, Nerangi Dick, whose prototype was Corney Delaney. Like him, he carried cynicism to its extreme limit. The likeness was so exact that it was currently reported that the devil, on one occasion, being short of a cook, had at sudden notice packed the original Corney back to earth from his comfortable corner near the furnace. The only billet he could retain was at the head station. He respected the master, and reserved his growls for the kitchen.

'The "boogil-colli" gins, water-carriers, had a rough time of it when Nerangi Dick reigned. He might be seen driving them to their duties, with many crisp oaths and a large stick. Of the male aboriginal he was even more intolerant. Ordered to feed the station blacks, he gave them their meat and damper as if throwing a bait to a dog. Hutkeeper rarely received his ration without being subsequently chased by Dick, armed with his broomstick. It reminded a Waverley student of Peter Peebles pursued by Nanty Ewart, or, more familiarly, of a sour-tempered Skye terrier pursuing a collie. Hutkeeper, on these occasions, keeping well out of reach, but

looking back over his shoulder from time to time, with a scowl which had in it a deeper meaning than the acerbity of the other. Should these two meet on the war-path, the devil would full surely recover his own.

'I told Lorten, after witnessing one of these periodical coursing matches, that Hutkeeper would make a bad enemy.'

'Take another tumbler, old man, after all that running,' suggested Parklands. 'I have had two sleeps and gone over all my stock bargains for the next three months since you commenced the life and times of that nigger. As a fictionist—historian, I mean—you can't be licked.'

'Mr. a—Sparks,' exclaimed Ernest, who had become confused between Parklands' real name and sobriquet, 'pray permit Mr. Brandon to conclude his deeply interesting tale. I wouldn't miss it for anything.'

Sparks murmured something about the Tract Society, and affected to compose himself to sleep. Brandon having compounded a restorative, then proceeded.

'When Will Lorton arrived at the camp day was just breaking. There were a dozen "goondies" to be visited, and the inmates started to their work. Each black fellow, at the reveille, caught up a few waddies, and made tracks for the wash-pen, with his hands full of blazing mulga bark, waving about his body. Hutkeeper had been called, but to his surprise Will found, on passing his goondi a second time, that he had not gone with the others. Having a light switch in his hand, he thoughtlessly gave him an admonitory tap across his tattooed shoulders. Hutkeeper at once seized his nulla in one hand, stuck his tomahawk in his belt, his sole article of clothing, and made towards the washpool with his firebark in his left hand.

'Now Lorton, having finished his work at the camp, turned to walk back to breakfast. He had not gone a dozen paces when a crushing blow fell on the back of his head. He staggered forward, and turning received another, which laid open his head, and dropped him in his tracks. As he fell he saw Hutkeeper leap at him with upraised tomahawk.

'What saved his life was this. Two or three blacks still in camp, having a wholesome fear of tribal expiation at the hands of the native troopers, seized the infuriated savage, and diverted the blows of his tomahawk. In the meanwhile Will Lorton, only temporarily "kilt," rose dizily to his feet, and catching the foe a straight blow behind the ear, laid out that gentleman as neatly as if he had been dropped with his own weapon. He then threw himself upon the prostrate chieftain and wrested his arms from him. Before he could seize him, however, the slippery savage, eluding his grasp, was bounding through the trees, and soon after passed out of sight. Poor Will reached the home station covered with blood, and looking particularly faint.

'An angry man, ye may opine,
Was he, the proud Count Palatine,

which means that I, Aymer Brandon, was wroth exceedingly at this deed of blood (literally, indeed, the bright Norman blood of which Master Will was depleted on the occasion made a very pretty pool, artistically considered, on the earthen floor of his room). So "boot and saddle" was the order of the day.'

'Now we're coming to it,' exclaimed Mr. Parklands, in a tone of deep satisfaction. 'This is the sort of literature I go in for—incident, old man—lots of incident

—eh, Mr. Neuchamp, isn't that your style? Now, why couldn't you have given us that first, old man, like this: "One fine morning, on the Paroo, Will Lorton went to the blacks' camp, didn't look behind him, and fell against a nulla, which happened to be up at the time."'

'You have no sentiment, Sparks, as I have always reminded you. What little humour you possess has been prematurely wasted on barmaids. You would enjoy a story about that old blue stag that nearly deprived you of a purchaser, just as much as Browning's last poem—more, in fact. But I have commenced this yarn, and you *must* and shall have it, if we sit up till daylight.'

'Only too happy, my dear f'ler,' murmured Sparks somnolently. 'Don't shoot me instead of that nigger. You seem to have been a rum lot out there, and old "Hutbuilder," as you call him, rather more of a gentleman than any of you. His manners rendered him unpopular, I suppose; and you trumped up this cock-and-bull story about Will just to suit the case for the Crown. Ah, Neuchamp, my boy, you have no idea how these benighted back-country squatters go on, when you and I are not there, and there is no one to check their violence.'

'About five minutes after Will was returned as "killed, wounded, and missing" from the wash-pen for the day, a black trooper rode in with a letter from his inspector, who was quartered about twenty miles from Tthoondula. Saddling up, and pressing trooper Mayboy into the service, we galloped into the camp. He was armed with his carbine, and I with a very effective seven-shooter. I had long vowed never to draw a bead upon a blackfellow for anything less than bloodshed. But in

my wrath I swore to shoot the old warrigal at sight, and in trifles I like to keep my word.

'In the camp reigned great excitement. His countrymen freely condemned Hutkeeper, and morally gave him up to justice.

'"No good—Hutkeeper! Waddy-galo that fellow. Goondi-galo, goondi-galo mine. Baal waddy-galo."

'I wasted no time in the camp, but made a cast round, to pick up the tracks of the fugitive. Mayboy, eager as a bloodhound, was soon on the trail. On the soft soil of the Paroo it was not difficult to follow, with eyes like those of Mayboy.

'I said, "You think man him (catch), Hutkeeper?"

'"Baal!" answered the trooper, "that fellow too much burri. Bime-by marmy (officer) come up, and all about black trooper: then man him, Hutkeeper; mine think it shoot him!—Ki—i—i!"

'The latter expression long drawn out, was expressive of the high degree of satisfaction which that consummation would afford him and his brothers-in-arms. Having made sure of the direction of the tracks, Mayboy and I returned to the station. A messenger had long since been sent to Mr. Bothwell, the inspector, reporting the outrage, and asking for the prompt arrest of the offender. "Arrest or slay the Frank," was old Lambro's order; "Catch the nigger, alive or dead," was, in effect, the word of command when murder or wounding with intent was proved.

'Within six hours after the commission of the offence Mr. Bothwell arrived with five highly efficient-looking troopers, making, with Mayboy, six in all.

'Far finer specimens of the Australian aboriginal were they than their Paroo brethren. Recruited from the

Wide Bay coast tribes, noted for warlike propensities, nothing delighted these human bloodhounds so much as being slipped to the blood-trail.

'Shearing was postponed for two days to allow for the man hunt. After dinner the war party, consisting of Bothwell, myself, and the six troopers, saddled up and departed. We carried revolvers, the men carbines, throwing bullets of murderous size. Our janissaries were named respectively Mayboy, Tiger, Jerry, Bloomer, Tangerine, and Bulldog. Of these, Mayboy was Bothwell's aide-de-camp and special favourite. The war-cry of "Hi, Mayboy!" was well known on the Paroo and Warrego. Something decisive generally followed that exclamation. Heaven help the poor wretch on whose footsteps these six bush devils were slipped. When the trail carried blood they were never known to fail or falter.

'Put them to track cattle, horses, or sheep, and after half a day they began to grow weary or careless; but with a human quarry ahead every eye was unerring, every muscle was tireless. Clue after clue was checked off with unvarying certainty, the result of human ingenuity allied with hereditary instinct unerring as that of the sleuth-hound.

'Mayboy took the lead, laying the pack on at the exact spot where he had quitted the scent in the morning. For miles back from the Paroo the soil is composed of soft red loam, the tracks on which are as clear of imprint as fossils upon the old red sandstone. But once reach the arid flinty range, and its secrets of wayfaring man or beast are only revealed to the microscopic gaze of the Australian Indian. The troopers rode carelessly together while the footsteps of the fugitive were printed in large type, so to speak. Two kept slightly ahead, the rest following.'

Mr. Parklands aroused himself suddenly from a posture of deep attraction or attention, and observed Ernest's eager countenance fixed upon Brandon's calm features, as he, recalling with a certain thrill of interest the stern episode of old pioneer life, told in his low, deep tones the tale of doom.

'Not caught him yet, old man?' demanded Mr. Parklands. 'Devilish slow work. If I'd old Ber-bar we'd have shot every blackfellow in the Paroo by this time. Couldn't lick him. You won't take any whisky —that's why your story hangs fire.'

'There is something deeply fascinating about a tale like this,' exclaimed Ernest. 'One does not often hear the tragedy from the mouth of one of the actors. I can imagine nothing more exciting than joining in such a chase. Of course you were able to take him alive, with your band of Mohicans. Uncas and old Hawkeye would not have been out of place in such a war-trail, had there only been a Mingo to the fore somehow.'

'I have the greatest respect for Uncas and Chingachgook; as for Hawkeye, I have honoured him from my youth up,' said Brandon; 'but I firmly believe that Tiger and Mayboy would have given both of them a wrinkle in tracking and woodcraft generally.

'It was surmised that the trail would follow the river for about twenty-five miles, to a favourite camping-ground by the side of a deep lagoon, known as Tthulajerra. Mayboy, dropping alongside of Mr. Bothwell, said, "Marmy! mine think it, old man Hutkeeper, first time weja longa Tthulajerra, plenty blackfellow sit down there. That fellow messmate, then all-about pull-away long a scrub." This calculation was proved to be accurately correct, as the tracks ran straight to the

lagoon, where a deserted but recently occupied camp was found. Smouldering fires, heaps of mussel-shells, and fish-bones lay scattered around, while the stones in the native ovens were not yet cold.

'When Tthulajerra was reached it was nearly sunset; so a camp was organised for the night. Mr. Bothwell fully expected to run his quarry to earth before the next sunset. Unless Hutkeeper separated from the tribe they were sure of him. It was unlikely that the deer would leave the herd. Blacks prefer to fly and to fight in company; they dread solitary journeyings. Two camps were formed—one for Bothwell and myself; the other, at about fifty yards distant, for the troopers.

'That camp scene, before the moon rose, was one only to be found in a new land. The Paroo, unlike the Warrego, is not famed for heavy timber; still immense eucalypti border lagoons like the Tthulajerra. After our spare and simple meal I felt indisposed to sleep. I lighted my pipe, and, stretched on my rug, lay long in thought and reverie. The blazing camp fires illumined the silent giants of the wilderness from root to topmost branch. In the firelight the smooth white bark of the limbs and stem had a deathlike appearance, in keeping with the gruesome feelings naturally engendered by a "man-hunt." I could scarcely restrain myself from peopling the ghastly outspread limbs with hundreds of victims. I thought I saw before me the African "death-tree," while the black figures of the naked troopers, flitting from fire to fire, favoured the illusion. They seemed to be awaiting the fall of the hideous fruit, and the furnishing forth of the feast. Mr. Bothwell, not being anything beyond a very practical and efficient Government officer, had gone to sleep. He was a good

doer, and sleeping was no trouble to him. When the moon rose the morbid fancies were dispersed, and as the last dark form sank down seemingly into the earth I slept.

'After catching and destroying Hutkeeper about five hundred times, and being murdered by that relentless savage in every conceivable manner, I awoke, about 4 A.M., to find that a thick impenetrable fog lay nearly o'er "wood and wold." I replenished the dying fire, and not feeling inclined to sleep more, sat silent and brooding till the fog lifted, and one by one the shrouded forms came forth from the shadowy veil, like lost years through the mists of memory.'

'And yet people say there is no romance in a new country!' exclaimed Mr. Neuchamp, who, the best of created listeners, from his largely developed gift of sympathy, had eagerly drunk in every word, so manifestly enjoying the narration that Brandon, an imaginative and poetical though generally reserved man, had been unconsciously stimulated into a fuller development of the surroundings of his weird tale than under ordinary circumstances he would have thought possible. 'No poetry? No dramatic position? What a picture for an artist: a solitary figure in that gray silent dawn, by a dim smouldering fire; the careless savage troopers; the tranquil officer, calm but remorseless as a Roman centurion!'

Brandon continued, musingly—

'Tree after tree stands forth, slowly, as if painted by an invisible artist upon a canvas of mist. The foreground is quickly filled in. Small tumuli appear. The troopers swathed, all deathlike, in their blankets. Then a horse is traced on the murky easel; then another. Clink, clink, go the chains which fetter their feet.

'"All aboard!" I shouted, at length casting away the phantasmal creation. "The busy babbling and remorseless day" is again born, for us and for all mankind, in this south land. Up spring the troopers. Bothwell arose, but kept his position until scorched out of it by the heaped-up fire. Breakfast was concluded, and the horses stood saddled and ready, as the sun rose.

'A different disposition of the forces was made for this day's work. The troopers separated into three pairs—Bulldog and Jerry followed the trail through all its deviations; Bloomer and Tangerine skirted on either flank, keeping about a hundred yards from the presumed line and the same distance ahead of Bulldog and Jerry; Mayboy and Tiger rode a quarter of a mile in advance of the party.

'The system was this: The couple on the trail ensured its being neither lost nor overlooked; the skirters, by riding straight on either side, picked up the tracks when any deviation was made. Whoever "cut" the trail whistled, when the other three quickly closed on him, and resumed their places from that point. The two in advance sought to cut the tracks some distance ahead; when they did so a whistle, low but clear, brought those in the rear forward in a canter to start afresh from the new point. By this method of economising eyesight, as the signals followed each other in quick succession, the ground was covered much more quickly than if the trail had been traced through all its sinuosities.

'The inspector and I followed at easy distance our sable sleuth-hounds — a pack without huntsman or whipper-in. They had this advantage over their canine comrades: their casts were made in advance. Was an unusually difficult tract of country encountered, where

"scenting" was slow, the advance-guard could ride beyond it, pick up the trail on more favourable ground and signal their comrades. Miles of rocky ridges were crossed, when the only guide to the silent avengers of blood was a stone turned over, the print of toe or heel on the scanty sand or gravel collected between the boulders. At times, merely a tiny white flake dropped from the fire-barks, carried in the coolimans to prevent the tell-tale fall of ashes, betrayed the pursued.

'Still eager, tireless, almost joyous, rode forward the death-band on the faint footsteps of the hunted savage. Hutkeeper, thus fleeing, would surely know that he had staked his life, and lost it, when he permitted his wild nature to overcome him. He would know that many hours would not elapse before men of his own race would be on his trail—better trackers and more tireless than his tribe. But onward he fled, still ascending the range, knowing that the two ends of the trail were coming together only too surely. No white man can ever know what thoughts passed through the brain of the doomed old heathen during that long, hopeless flight.

'If each individual man were not merely one of the units composing a vast system of usurpation, called from time immemorial by the specious name of Progress, one could afford to sympathise with the savage for smiting his oppressor. But the world will surely be *very* old when that most ancient of laws "the strongest shall possess," ceases to have force. We preach the law of Right, but the older natural doctrine of Might has always prevailed and will find adherents to the end, so long as one man or one animal, brute or human, is born stronger than his fellow.

'Thus, through the livelong sweet spring day, the sleuth-hounds swerved and faltered not. As the day wore on, the writing on Nature's book, the ink whereof was the lifeblood of him that fled, became easier to read. The sable coil seemed to work more unerringly than ever. It glided like a huge serpent among the trees, the head shooting forward to be swiftly and smoothly followed by the sinuous body.

'"What do you think of the tracking?" asked Bothwell with pardonable pride, his eyes resting upon Mayboy, who was at that moment beating the covert of a close scrub, lifting his head from time to time like "questing hound."

'"It is superb," I answered; "but, on my soul, Bothwell, I hope the old fellow will escape. According to his light, he but hit out like a man, and we are now treating him like a beast of prey. They must kill some one very near and dear to me, before I undertake a job of this kind again."

'"We must either shoot them," said Bothwell, "or give up the land. Clear off the old and teach the young, is my motto at present."

'"Yes," said I sadly, "another illustration of the 'fitness of things.' It would seem as if the present were perpetually to be damned for the benefit of the future. I should be sorry to have to explain to Hutkeeper's tribe, after we have killed him, the meaning of the words, 'If thine enemy smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the left also.'"

'All the troopers were now seen to be clustered together. They were off their horses, smoking—a sure sign that they felt secure of their prey. When Bothwell and I joined them, Mayboy came forward dangling a small dilly-bag, dropped by one of the gins.

'"Marmy! mine think it weja now; you make alight that one mountain, nerangi good way like it, ugh" (the guttural accompanied by the usual black's point, the protrusion of the under lip)—"that one Boolooloo water sit down. Blackfellow big one tired weja long a Boolooloo. To-night yan longa camp; boomalli (shoot, slay) Hut-keeper."

'Boolooloo was a turreted hill, rising abruptly from the crown of the range, and towering far above it.

'At its foot was a native well—a natural tank—scooped out of solid rock, gourd-shaped, with a small man-hole at the top. Its depth was, perhaps, twelve feet, with a diameter of double the extent. Its shaded position, under a ledge of overhanging rock, enabled it to contain water through any ordinary summer.

'The rugged plateau of the summit of Boolooloo had been hollowed into caves from immemorial time, favoured retreats of the wild tribes in its vicinity. It wanted now an hour to sundown; the hill was then three miles distant.

'Bothwell's order was to wait until nightfall, then to surprise the camp and to arrest Hutkeeper, with the usual alternative if he evaded or resisted the capture. He promised me that, if possible, he should be taken alive. Sudden vengeance having been denied me, I was far from keen for the old pagan's blood. Bothwell could have told me that Hutkeeper's last sun was setting.

'The troopers, deciding to stalk the bush on foot, took off their superfluous clothing, also their boots, slinging their ammunition pouches over their shoulders. The horses, unsaddled and close hobbled, were turned loose. Then all awaited the close of day. Supper was postponed till after the invasion of the camp, as a fire would have betrayed our vicinity. The troopers, light-hearted and

free from anxiety, a complaint chiefly confined to the white man, passed away the time card-playing. Their officer and I sat silently on the short turf, watching the shadows of the gydya trees lengthen, ah! so slowly. The sun was fading over the northern turrets of Boolcoloo, lighting them into elfin splendour, as might gleam the battlements of a ruined castle. A fast-glooming shadow crept around the mountain, until at length its huge mass was hidden from the watchers.

'The light of day had departed. The hour was come. The last act of the tragedy was about to commence.

'The troopers put up their cards, lifted their carbines, and passed shadow-like and silently through the trees. We followed. In an hour we reached the base of Boolooloo.

'Mayboy halted and whispered to his chief, "Marmy! close up to camp now, drekaly see fire longa nother one side." The wind sighed from the hill top *towards* us. There was therefore no danger of the sharp-eared blacks' dogs giving tongue in time to warn them. Then all crawled noiselessly up the steep sides of Boolooloo, pausing when about a hundred yards from the camp. Fires were smouldering in front of the caves, but not a creature was visible. We moved cautiously forward. Then a dog raised a dismal howl, and was joined in full chorus by his comrades.

'In the middle of this mournful music the troopers bounded into the camp, scattering the dogs into the crevices of the rocks. The next moment a yell of terror and despair burst from the wretched blacks, who came rolling out of the caves, and, huddled together in groups, they wailed out, "Goondi galo (tame blacks), goondi galo," incessantly.

'Then from the centre cave leaped forth a hideous demoniac figure, ghastly with white and red pigment. "Hutkeeper! Hutkeeper!" shouted the troopers. "Look out, Manny! that one big one coola (angry, fierce)." By the dim starlight I was enabled to recognise my late shepherd transformed into a warrior, prepared to meet his enemies fairly and to the death. The old savage held before him his file-shaped shield. In his belt hung the nulla and tomahawk; while his right hand held aloft a battle-spear, poised and quivering.

'For one moment—his last—he stood with blazing eye and wolfish gaze upon the foe, a true warrior of the waste, then hurled his spear into the centre of the party. The quivering rifled weapon, speeding through the air like a cloth-yard shaft, grazed the cheek of Mayboy, and by a hairbreadth only missed the somewhat solid proportions of Bothwell. Six carbines rang out in answering volley, and, leaping into the air, Hutkeeper fell forward on his face, a dead man.

'Our work was finished. Civilisation had been vindicated. The whole party silently retreated, leaving the sad tribe alone with their dead. Will the caverns be haunted, in days to come, by a spirit that cannot be laid by the white man's bullet? When I returned to Tthoondula, I thus addressed my partner, "Well, old boy, I can see that man-hunting is not much in my line. You'll oblige me greatly by killing your own nigger next time."'

'"The forest laws are sharp and stern,"' quoted Ernest, as the tale and the life of the sullen son of the soil came to an end simultaneously. 'I suppose there is a necessity for prompt punishment of violence in a frontier settlement; but it seems rather hard on the poor old fellow. How does the law of England stand?'

'Well, of course,' said Brandon, 'it was strictly legal to endeavour to arrest either an aboriginal or a white man upon the charge of "cutting and wounding with intent to kill," or even "to do grievous bodily harm." If such a prisoner resisted the police, they were authorised to fire upon him. In this case, it was impossible to take him alive. However that may be, he paid in full of all demands for his crime. I fancy we may as well turn in.'

'So the nigger is dead at last!' exclaimed the awakening Parklands. 'Good-bye, Neuchamp; you may not be up when I start. Aymer, your story is really grand. Too short, if anything. You don't know a little more, just to top up with? The worst of these interesting yarns, they keep you awake so. If I am late at starting to-morrow, it might be a loss of five hundred pounds to me—you wouldn't like me to send in a bill for half. Why don't I go to bed now? I feel too much excited. Besides, I am afraid I missed some. You wouldn't mind beginning again? Well, sir, I'm off now. Never mind throwing a boot at me—one of your boots is no joke, remember. But look here—if it takes three hours to kill one blackfellow, how long——'

Here Mr. Parklands disappeared suddenly, simultaneously with the evolution of a missile of some sort discharged wrathfully by the narrator.

Mr. Neuchamp also departed, and being rather tired slept until past sunrise. When he came forth only Brandon was visible, who told him that Parklands had left at dawn, and was now many a mile on his way.

## CHAPTER XVIII

Mr. Neuchamp of Rainbar had now reached a very important position in his career. He had gained a fulcrum for that lever by the aid of which he trusted to move the Australian world,—to raise or to cause to tremble—and finally to impel upon the incline of undoubted and social improvement—the hitherto inanimate mass of colonial society, strong in the *vis inertiæ* which rules primitive or unenlightened communities. Before this happy moment of proprietorship he could but enunciate principles and theories. Now he was enabled to demonstrate them by practice. He would have comrades, neighbours, dependents, workmen of his own. And concurrently with the most effective and successful working of the station, he would show New South Wales, Australia, and the world generally, what an Englishman of culture, with a purpose, could effect in the way of reform. Captain Cook had discovered the continent—proconsuls of greater or less intelligence had governed it. It was left for him, Ernest Neuchamp, to raise it to that point of social and industrial eminence which should make it a Pharos, a wonder-sign, an exemplar throughout all the civilised world.

It may be gathered that Mr. Neuchamp was alone and

possessed his soul in peace, when he found sufficient time in which to indulge these grand ideas and magniloquent reflections. Mr. Parklands' company was not favourable to contemplation. His very existence was an aggressively energetic fact, wholly adverse to reverie or mental repose of any description. He was always talking or smoking, or asserting or denying, or going out or coming in, or preparing for his next journey or reviewing his last one. His very correspondence was of a telegrammatic and restless nature, full of reference to distances and routes, orders to overseers and stockmen to go thither, or come hither, to await him at one place or meet him at another. He went to bed defiantly and got up noisily, full of plans and prospects, and requiring everybody to arise and be stirring, in the most literal sense.

Aymer Brandon was constitutionally of a calm, equable, and chiefly amiable temperament, provided that he had things mostly his own way. But he was temporarily excited by the demon of unrest which abode in Parklands, so that between practical jokes, contradictions, reminiscences of adventures, revelries, and the like, no peace, in the true sense of the word, was possible until their departure from Rainbar.

Not until several days after that event did Mr. Neuchamp realise that he was clothed with real and undisputed sovereignty.

Then with sudden afflatus arose in his brooding mind the thought of the elevated duties and deep responsibility of his position. It was the hour of the evening meal. This frugal meal—damper, hard corned beef, and very black astringent tea—the same served in a very black quart pot—Ernest had enjoyed in solitude. Humble as was the fare, it was amply sufficient for a man in the

pride of vigorous youth. The indifferent Bohea had power to stimulate delicately, yet positively, the nerves of Mr. Neuchamp's, perhaps, hypersensitive brain.

The night was calm and clear. The starry heavens held no cloud. The long lagoon lay darkly metallic, or broke into phosphoric ripples. The mysterious sounds of the desert were rare and as yet unfamiliar to the listener. All things afforded a startling contrast to his English name and surroundings, even to his later metropolitan habitudes. Yet as he sat there by the light of the stars, amid the tremendous solitude of the wilderness, his heart swelled with the thought that he was the virtual ruler of a territory larger than his ancestral country—larger than any member of the house of Neuchamp had owned since the first baronial fiefs in their blood-bought Normandy.

'What are the chief and foremost needs of this waste empire of mine — this desert city?' soliloquised he. 'Here I have land enough to satisfy the earth hunger of the most ravenous aspirant of *la terre*. Water in reasonable though perhaps insufficient quantity. What is the great absent factor? Population, a yeoman class, a race of Vavasours, who could use these great levels for the growth of certain semi-tropical crops, who might rear upon them a limited number of stock, who would secure homes for themselves and food for their working oxen; who would remain loyal to me, their powerful yet philosophic ally; who would work for me at reasonable rates at ordinary station work, or any reproductive improvements which I might suggest, and who would thus entirely sweep away the present undesirable relations which have hitherto subsisted between Australian country labourers and their employers. It would not be expensive to provide a school and a teacher for their children, to be

paid by results. I should be enabled, by a steady supply of labour, to cultivate a reasonable area. Gardens and experimental industries would of course spring up. The carrying capabilities of Rainbar might be enormously increased by cutting a narrow canal, as Parklands suggested, between the waters of the river and the chain of deep, yet dry lakes at the back of the run. The advantages of labour on one side, of wages on the other, would be mutual. Simultaneously an improvement in the character and quality of the herd would take place. Scientific experiments might be regularly made and recorded as to rainfall and other important matters. The culture of the vine, the orange, even the silkworm, might be introduced; and finally, after a few years, the semi-co-operative community at Rainbar, self-contained, happy, and prosperous, might be pointed out as at least *one* instance where enlightened theory and successful practice had accomplished an advance in civilisation, had solved the problem of the harmonious interchange of labour and capital, and had interpolated at least one Arcadian chapter in the sad history of mankind.'

As these and other fair and fascinating trains of ideas passed through the mind of Ernest Neuchamp—while outside of his lonely and humble dwelling the silent stars burned in the still wondrous firmament, and nought but the monotonous and half-boding sound of the night-bird broke the profound primeval silence—he passed instinctively from the stage of triumphant justification of his plans to a half-felt distrust as to their practicability; and with the thought of failure came a vision of the calm questioning gaze of Antonia Frankston, before which his ardent scheme and aspirations for the perfectibility of the race had more than once appeared dreamy and Quixotic.

The fancied questioning of old Paul, cool as kindly, yet keen as a cross-examiner, seemed adverse to the Utopian infant. But Ernest's strong enthusiasm of humanity, his generally sanguine temperament, carried him for that night over all obstacles, and he retired to a *very* lowly couch, fully determined that the Rainbar community should enjoy every advantage which co-operative life and labour had ever yielded to intelligent guidance.

With regard to the ordinary working of the station, he felt at a disadvantage in the absence of Jack Windsor. He had been so much in the habit of relying upon that ready-witted and helpful personage in the executive department, that he felt comparatively helpless when solely responsible. He considered also that his life would be now almost unendurably solitary without the companionship of some one nearly approaching his own grade, who would be at once an assistant and a companion.

In this extremity, he bethought himself of his late associates at Garrandilla. None of these young gentlemen was absolutely necessary at that ovine university. They had taken their degrees, so to speak. Their places were perhaps waiting to be filled by other alumni, some of whom paid a fair sum for the privilege of fulfilling, very literally, the position of the subordinates of Jairus, to that rather exacting centurion Mr. Doubletides.

This point being settled, he essayed to make choice of a probable companion. Grahame was obviously devoted to sheep. The merino had 'marked him for his own,' and it would have been wrong to have withdrawn so promising a woolsorter from the establishment. Moreover, he was not interesting or sympathetic as a companion.

Fitzgerald Barrington was interesting and amusing,

if not sympathetic. Mr. Neuchamp was much minded to invite him to Rainbar. But in his way he was as unlikely as Grahame to take himself to any scheme for the improvement of the common people. With all the *bonhomie* of his country, he despised and disbelieved in the people, and would not have put forth his hand to save them from a fate quite commensurate with their deserts.

The remaining cadet then was Charley Banks. In this youngster Ernest had always recognised a manly and self-reliant nature, by no means beneficially indebted to early training, and having come off indifferently in the matter of book-learning. Still he thought him improvable from certain indications which led him to think him not wholly unsuitable as a companion. He had often expressed his dislike to sheep and his anxiety to live on a cattle station. Mr. Neuchamp, finally coming to the conclusion that he might do the boy a service, and at the same time provide himself with a companion in his solitude, wrote a letter to Mr. Jedwood, in which he described his purchase and gave a short sketch of the capabilities of the run, winding up with a fair offer of employment for Mr. Banks if he had no objection to his leaving Garrandilla, and if the youngster himself cared to come.

He was not long left in suspense concerning the intentions of Charley Banks. He received, as soon as the somewhat indifferent postal arrangements permitted, a letter from Jedwood, informing him that he was heartily welcome both to Mr. Banks and to Mr. Fitzgerald Barrington, if it pleased him to take a brace of cadets. But that, perhaps, it would be safer and more profitable to take one, who could do more work and be less trouble

(on the well-known principle of two boys being only equal to half a boy) than a couple.

From Charley Banks himself he received a short but enthusiastic letter, setting forth his gratitude for being remembered by him, and his intention of starting for Rainbar in company with Jack Windsor, who, it was reported, was on the road up from town, and not very far from Garrandilla at the date of writing.

Much pleased with the idea of having shortly the companionship of Mr. Banks, and the aid of Jack Winsdor, upon whose ready and practical counsel he had learned to place a high value, Mr. Neuchamp, after a few purposeless rides round his territory, conceived the bold idea of mustering and drafting a portion of the herd, with the aid of the aboriginals whom Mr. Parklands had bequeathed to him. A general muster he of course knew that, without a considerable force of volunteer assistants, he was powerless to undertake. But a portion of the herd he thought he could get in. 'It will familiarise them with going through the yards,' said he to himself, 'and if there are any calves to put the new brand on, we can manage *them*.' Like most inexperienced purchasers, he had immediately changed the LP brand, known from Queensland to Adelaide, to one of his own invention, viz. ⅁NE (a conjoined hieroglyph), which, as combining the initials of his Christian name and surname with the second letter of the latter, he thought ingenious and attractive, whereas, in point of fact, it took years to gain the widespread association with Rainbar which the old brand already possessed.

During former musters Mr. Neuchamp's constructive faculties had been busy with projects for improving the accepted mode of drafting cattle. Much to his own

satisfaction, he had arranged his system beforehand. He was confident that it would work without a hitch. His humane tendencies had been outraged by the unsparing use of the ruthless stockwhip, keenest when unheard, as well as of the long, pliant, wattle-drafting stick, not apparently a weapon upon which to depend your life, but in skilful hands—and such are not wanting at every important muster—sufficient to drop, as by a thunderbolt, the most formidable beast. This Mr. Neuchamp had remarked with pain and displeasure. Hitherto he had seen in drafting-yards only men used to managing breeding cattle, among which the calf of a week old, given to stagger wildly between your legs, and the wary and still more dangerously sudden 'Micky,' a two-year-old bull. Thus, to his eye, cattle drafting was less a difficult art than one which could obviously be conducted on a more æsthetic basis.

That portion of the Rainbar herd which Mr. Neuchamp inveigled into the stockyard, then and there, with the assistance of the black boys, consisted almost wholly of the well-bred station 'crawlers,' as the stockmen term them from their peaceable and orderly habits. These guileless animals he managed, with but slight driving, to impel into the large receiving yards.

Beyond gazing with mild disapprobation on this proceeding they entered no protest. Indeed, when once in the yard, upon seeing the rails put up, they had all lain down and commenced the pleasing and reflective task of rumination. They had evidently made up their minds to a day's 'post and rails'—a matter to be borne with educated bovine philosophy.

Mr. Neuchamp then armed himself and black boys with light hunting crops having slender thongs. With

these merely suggestive scourges they did not find it difficult to urge the indifferent animals into the smaller forcing-yards. Having got thus far, switches which would sting but not bruise were substituted. These seemed sufficiently intimidating to cause the steady steers and mild old cows to stroll calmly into the drafting lane.

So far the unsophisticated heathen, though wondering much at the manifold precautions taken with station pets, carried out all orders, in momentary expectation of some miracle being performed. That consummation being slow in arriving, Piambook protested, 'Mine thinkit pyam nerangi fellow carp now,' head and pluck standing out in bold relief in his mind's eye as he made the suggestion.

'Open that gate, Piambook,' said Ernest gravely, pointing to the one which led into the 'run-about' yard. Piambook, snuffed out, obeyed, and wonderingly observed his master switch beast after beast into the various receptacles for cattle beyond. They were then released into the bush. Upon regaining their liberty, after an inquiring backward gaze, as who should say, 'Is that all?' they lay down a few yards from the slip-rails and gravely ruminated, much wondering, doubtless, at this, to them, wholly unprecedented experience. That night in camp Piambook remarked to Mrs. P., before coiling under his blanket, 'Mine thinkit Mister Noojin wompi-wompi long a cobbra.'

Ernest came to the conclusion that man was not born to live alone, in a gradual, leisurely, and very decided manner, before he was gladdened one day by the arrival of Mr. Charley Banks, accompanied, to his further satisfaction, by Jack Windsor.

'The old woman had got all right, bless her heart,' Jack explained, 'and he had come up in hot haste, after

he had heard Mr. Neuchamp had bought Rainbar. He found, when as far on his road as Garrandilla, that Mr. Banks was just starting, so they had joyfully joined company.'

Charley Banks was of opinion that he had got to the right shop at last. 'Everybody he had heard speak of the run had said,' he informed Ernest, 'that Rainbar was an out-and-out fattening run; that it was not half stocked; that the cattle were mostly very good, except a lot out at the Back Lake, and the best thing he could do was to clear them off for pigmeaters. The Mildool people were sending off a mob next week, and they would take all there were at Rainbar of the same description, and share expenses.'

'Pigmeaters!' exclaimed Ernest; 'what kind of cattle do you call those? Do bullocks eat pigs in this country?'

'No, but pigs eat them, and horses too,' affirmed Jack Windsor; 'and a very good way of getting rid of rubbish; all that's a turn too good for making slaughter-yard bacon —does for the Chinamen; they ain't over particular.'

'Oh! that's it,' said Mr. Neuchamp, reassured; 'but what price will such cattle fetch?'

'Thirty shillings to two pounds, and well sold at that,' said Jack.

'But would they not fatten, with time and careful management?' inquired Ernest, loath to lose his probable profits.

'Wouldn't fatten in a hundred years; not in a lucerne paddock, not if you poured melted fat down their throats! They're mostly old savage devils, all horn and hide; only fit for killing people and spoiling the rest of the herd. Now's a first-rate chance to get 'em away with the Mildool lot to Melbourne.'

Charley Banks followed on the same side, observing that the cattle referred to were thoroughly bad and unprofitable animals to keep or feed, and the sooner they were off the run and sold at however small a price the better. 'But I suppose you got something allowed in the price for them, didn't you, by Mr. Parklands?'

Ernest now recollected that this must have been the particular denomination alluded to by Aymer Brandon as those Back Lake 'ragers,' and in reference to which he had calmly decided to knock off a hundred and fifty pounds from the amount of the purchase-money.

'Oh yes, I remember now,' he said. 'I suppose I can afford to sell them at a moderate price.'

It was finally arranged that Jack Windsor should go on the next day to their neighbours at Mildool, and induce them to come to in force with all their available hands, as soon as they had mustered their own outlaws, to help them to get in and draft the Back Lake mob.

'I don't apprehend that they will be so very difficult to manage,' said Mr. Neuchamp, with a modest but slightly experienced air. 'That is, if they are taken quietly. I put through a good-sized lot of cattle a few days since, and had only Piambook and Boinmaroo with a hunting-crop each.'

Mr. Windsor and Charley Banks looked meaningly at each other. The slightest approach to a contraction might have been observed in the former's left eye as he made answer—

'There's cattle and cattle, sir. I don't think we had any regular out-and-outers at Garrandilla when we used to go and spend a week with old Mr. Hasbene. He told me to give you his best wishes most particular. But they say these Back Lakers has been, in a manner

of speaking, neglected. Mr. Parklands was always scraping the run bare as he could for fat stock, and let these old guns have their fling till he'd got time to make up a mob and clear 'em all out. But he is a gentleman as never has a minute to spare; always comin' up without notice, and rushin' off as if another day at home would ruinate him out and out, so they all say, and the long and the short of it is, it's fell upon us to make a clean sweep of 'em—and a tidy job it is. However, there's some smart boys from up the river, at Mildool now, and I think we can't have a better chance to tackle 'em. Isn't that so, Mr. Banks?'

Mr. Banks nodded, and Mr. Neuchamp having signified approval, Jack Windsor was accredited as plenipotentiary for the Mildool embassy, and the council terminated.

The improvements were not extensive at Rainbar, Mr. Parklands being a foe to station expenditure, except where horses and traps were concerned. In outlay for these necessaries of life, as he called them, his enemies asserted that he spent a small fortune annually. Certainly his travelling arrangements needed to be complete. He was continually on the road. He accomplished wonderful distances, and when once he had made an appointment, whatever the weather, the roads, the season, or the pastime, men knew that they could depend upon him to keep his tryst to the day, almost to the hour.

> Alike to him were tide or time,
> Moonless midnight or matin prime,

and he had hitherto been extremely lucky, whether from his deep-seated determination 'not to be licked,' or from other interested quarters, so that one of his admirers went so far as to say that if he had been due at St. Thomas's

the day after that historic island had been submerged, 'and a gull above it flying,' Parklands would have been descried sailing about in a cutter, searching sanguinely for his I.P., and defying the elements with his customary formula.

Still, though he abstained from fencing, and did not greatly see the use of dwellings in the bush, where a blackfellow was an inexpensive and efficient substitute for one and a few sheets of bark for the other, he had so far relaxed his austere notions of outlay at Rainbar as to sanction the erection of two huts and a large, strong, well-planned stockyard. Of these improvements he had boasted on the journey to such an extent that Ernest half expected a modified Swiss chalet and a stockyard like that of the municipal cattle-yards in Melbourne, of which he had seen a photo. Aymer Brandon laughed at his grand description, declining to expect anything but a couple of broken-backed humpies; and as for the cattle-yard, he assured Ernest that at the last muster he attended at Rainbar they carried a lot of posts and rails out to the Back Lake in drays, put them up temporarily, mustered the fat cattle adjacent, *by moonlight*, and brought the posts and rails back with them after they had served their turn. Then Sparks emitted divers scintillations, and finally became sulky, and declined further conversation.

However, the huts turned out to be weather-proof and substantial, as huts go, and the stockyard, if not macadamised like the Melbourne Stock Exchange, or covering thirty-six acres like its Chicago cousin, was yet a roomy and many-gated enclosure, equal to the working of twice as many head of cattle as Rainbar at this time boasted.

Mr. Windsor was therefore enabled to take up his abode with the hutkeeper in the edifice which did duty for kitchen and men's hut, while Mr. Banks secured a second bedroom in the other one with the proprietor, and professed himself to be snugly lodged. That young gentleman confided to Ernest his extreme gratification at finding himself permanently located at a 'real first-class, fattening, plains-country cattle station'; such an establishment, since his entrance into regular employment, having been his ideal location.

'Not a sheep near the place or likely to be for years,' he remarked exultingly—'that's what I like about it; all good rightdown cattle work to look forward to: drafting, branding, camping, and, I suppose, driving the fat cattle to Melbourne some day—won't that be jolly? As for sheep, I'm sick of the very sound of the name. When your work's done with cattle, it's done; but with sheep it never stops—winter and summer—all the year round.'

'Well, I must say I share your views about sheep, Charley,' said Mr. Neuchamp; 'it's the most unending grind that I know. Cattle work has the advantage of being more romantic and exciting when you are engaged in it, and of coming to a definite conclusion some time or other, when you can refresh your wearied senses. In the meantime we are not over supplied with resources at Rainbar, as yet. I have sent for some books and ordered the weekly papers. Until they arrive, I shall be rather hard-set, especially in the evenings.'

The intervening days were got over without any great difficulty, chiefly by means of a series of exploratory rides round the run, up and down the river; these last excursions offering the variety of a little shooting, a

double-barrelled gun being among the valuables left by Mr. Parklands, and 'given in,' upon the delivery of the place.

One evening brought a black boy from Mildool with a message that their muster was done, and that they would bring over the 'pigmeaters' they had gathered, and would muster the Back Lake cattle next day if Mr. Neuchamp would meet them there next morning.

Charley Banks was much excited at the news. 'You will see some riding now, and some drafting too, if the cattle are wild. All the best stockmen on the river, both up and down, were to be at Mildool this muster. There are some smart boys, I expect.'

On the following morning Mr. Neuchamp and his friend were astir long before daylight, and soon after sunrise were well on their way to the Back Lake, full of expectation.

Nor was the scene when they reached the lonely lake, with the aid of Piambook's guidance, other than novel to Ernest's partially-instructed vision.

The Back Lake was a grand-looking sheet of fresh water, covered with wild fowl, a thin fringe of timber surrounding its margin. On a promontory which ran into the lake for some distance was a camp, bare and stripped of herbage to an extent which denoted long and constant usage. Skeletons of cattle here and there showed where the rifle had been at work from time to time, the formidable horns which still abounded hinting that abnormal causes had been at work to bring about a state of survival of the fittest.

On the camp stood, or traversed in angry circles, about a thousand head of very mixed cattle, in every sense of the word, a number of grand animals in magni-

ficent condition, mingled with others that the most inexperienced eye could observe to be 'stale, flat, and unprofitable,' except for the very exceptional market and destination previously referred to.

At the distance of a couple of hundred yards from the main body stood the smaller lot, some four or five hundred, which the stock-riding contingent had evidently brought with them. Some were guarding them. Some restrained the camp cattle from leaving their parade ground. Others, among whom Ernest recognised Jack Windsor, were riding in pairs, and separating or 'cutting out,' as the cattle station phrase is, divers excited animals of a fierce countenance from the herd, and guiding them into the smaller division, with which, once associated, they were by the guardians thereof prevented from leaving.

Mr. Neuchamp's artistic mind was strongly impressed with the wild picturesque character of the scene. On every side the vast plain stretched unbrokenly as the sea. The score of stockmen, swarthy, bearded, carelessly if not wildly attired, bore in looks, and perhaps in some other respects, no slight resemblance to a party of Apaches or Comanches, the 'Horse Indians' of South-Western America. They were well mounted for the most part on splendidly-conditioned animals, for no living steeds enjoy richer pasture and purer air than those which range the great saltbush levels of the interior; and generally the riding was more lavish, and indeed reckless as to pace and danger, than those of any previous bushmen.

'There goes "Desborough's Joe," the best stockman on the river,' said Charley Banks admiringly. 'Him on the roan horse,' pointing to a slight black-bearded man on a magnificent roan horse, who, having forced an

immense black bullock out of the camp, was racing neck-and-neck with him, as he tried to break back, and as he 'blocked' the fierce beast at every frantic effort to double and rejoin his comrades, 'dropping' the terrific sixteen-foot stockwhip on face or flank with terrific emphasis. 'That half-caste boy is a rum one too. By George, he nearly jumped his horse on to that last bullock's back, when he got him headed straight for the cut-out cattle. There's Jack Windsor coming! they're going to knock off for a bit.'

Mr. Windsor came over to explain to his master that he had remained at Mildool to give his assistance until their muster was finished, in accordance with use and custom; the head stockman there covenanting as soon as the fat cattle had been sent off to come over, bringing his pigmeaters, and also his following of fellow-stockmen, to give the Rainbar folks a turn, and draft their 'Roosians' for them.

'So, as they was a very smart lot of coves as ever I see, sir,' pursued Mr. Windsor, 'I didn't think as we could do better than get 'em all over here and skin the Back Lake camp of all the out-and-outers. We might never have such another chance for no one knows when. If you and Mr. Banks will come down to the camp, you'll see the sort I'm having cut out, and a livelier lot of "ragers" I haven't seen for many a day; not since I was at Mr. Selmore's Mallee Meadows. There's only about three hundred of these, and not another on the run. But I'm blessed if *he'd* got anything else—wonderful man, Mr. Selmore!'

Ernest accompanied his followers to the camp, where Banks pointed out the types which all cattleholders agree in desiring to 'get shut of,' in Jack's phrase, as soon as

possible. After a short interval for refreshment, the stockmen, who had been in the saddle before dawn, recommenced cutting out, which tolerably violent exercise was only concluded at sunset. The moon being favourable, the whole band then closed in upon the *enfans trouvés*, leaving the camp cattle to go whither they listed. At some time in the night, after a tedious drive of many hours, the ample outer yards at Rainbar, with much shouting and whip volleys, received them, and the gates being *very* carefully secured, all further operations were adjourned to the morrow.

Early on the following morning Mr. Neuchamp betook himself to the yard, nervously anxious for a sight of the prey, so safely deposited there, in the uncertain light and misleading shadows of the midnight hour. The *coup-d'œil* is uncommon, wellnigh unique.

About seven hundred ultra-Bohemian bullocks, whose bodies appear to be mere appendages to their terrific horns, are safely (for themselves) yarded, many of them for the first time for the preceding ten years.

The trained bushman of Australia knows that yarding these inexpressible pariahs simply amounts to arming them for the fray. The resources, in attack or defence, developed in the confirmed 'rager,' are only to be learned by experience. He is the grizzly bear of Australia, and with a slight shade of odds should be my horse in a fight with that terrible plantigrade.

Mr. Neuchamp had looked forward to an exciting, perhaps dangerous encounter when they reached the station yards. But with this class of 'shorthorn' yarding is a much more rapid affair than with quiet station-bred cattle, which delay and resist with contemptuous disapproval born of familiarity. In such a case as the

present the leaders, if not bent on flight, dash through the widely-opened gateways into the yard like soldiers storming a fort. The rest clear out with equal celerity.

If not frustrated in his first attempt at breaking back, by the sabre stroke of a sixteen-foot stockwhip dropped fair between the eyes by a cabbage-tree-hatted, black, velvet-banded native, the 'rager' cuts through the opposing ranks like a dragoon through Chinese infantry. No one goes after him. Perhaps five years afterwards, at another grand battue, a black boy will remark, pointing to an old broken-winded, but indomitable warrior, with horns like scythe-blades, 'You menalu that fella? close up that fella boomalli yarraman belongi to me, long a Mr. Levison, old man muster long a Boocalthra Lake.' The 'rager' is old, weak, and crippled now. The time has passed when he could tread the war-path alone. He will not leave his comrades now. He labours along painfully, but on the grand old visage is stamped indelibly the 'hall-mark' of courage, the possession of which he shares with the monarchs of mortality. Doubt not that he will reach the yard, and in that enclosure defy menaces, shouts, blows from the unerring waddy, from the stockman's fire-tailed whips. He passes for the last time into what is now his graveyard. He will never leave it alive. At shut of day eight of his enslaved brethren drag him forth to the little spot of earth, his—what say I?—our only true heritage. Nature raises him a not ungraceful mausoleum of marsh-mallow. Farewell they of the unstoried herd! Like him, all unknowing of the base pangs of fear—like him, sped with a bullet through his brain, the only true death for a hero!

After the pleasant relaxation of breakfast, one of the

few comparatively civilised meals encountered during the last fortnight, pipes were lit, stockwhips greased and garnished with resplendent crackers, and all hands strolled in leisurely fashion towards the stockyard. This enclosure presented on approach a tossing sea, 'a vision of horns,' most literally. Had there been a particle of unanimity among the imprisoned criminals, desperate and accursed in the eyes of man, a whole side of the yard might easily have been carried away upon their united horns, but they were too busy with wars of reprisal.

Unable to vent their rage on the common enemy, they rushed, gored, trampled, and bruised one another. Hair, hide, blood, and dust were the staples in present request. The weakest went to the wall, metaphorically, each individual under the average standard of strength and ferocity faring like an unwary O'Hallaghan discovered at a fair composed of O'Callaghans.

The correct thing, on first arriving at a drafting yard, is to 'cockatoo,' or sit on the rails, high above the tossing horn-billows, and discuss the never-ending subject of hoof and horn.

Many of the captive 'ragers' had personal histories. Heroes of many a camp, they had gradually been driven back to the outside boundaries of their respective runs, and, though each of fattening qualities and contumacious conduct, finally outlawed. The cattle-brand of Cain was now affixed to them. Sentenced and finally doomed to the unprejudiced stomachs of Chinamen for a consideration of thirty shillings per head, horns given in.

Presently Piambook and Boinmaroo appear carrying bundles of carefully-selected drafting sticks. Each stockman picks his favourite weapon, trying its poise and touch, like a billiard cue, and deciding with much care

and deliberation. The ends are whittled to prevent splitting; passes and blows are made at imaginary foes. This part of the preparation does not last long. No mistakes are made. The cool, quiet-eyed youngsters know their weapon well, and the delicate and responsible work required of it. A desultory entry into the receiving-yard then takes place, each man picking his own panel.

The 'ragers' observing this movement keep wildly and excitedly 'ringing,' like a first-class Maëlstrom. As a matter of taste and safety, the original circular-sailing abyss would seem to be preferable. Some one *did* come out of that alive, *cruh* Edgar Allan Poe. But no human 'hide or hair' would have emerged (unmanufactured) from the 'horn-mill' we have faintly essayed to limn.

The practised stockriders, keeping an eye on the trampling multitude, now glide down on either side of the yard, thereby preventing a simultaneous rush at the fence, which, though of unusual massiveness, is barely up to the weight of six hundred bullocks, say three hundred tons, at a high degree of momentum.

There is no question of charging as yet. Matters have not reached the personal stage between the combatants. If the 'ring' crowds too near the fence, the men on that side would walk along the middle rail holding on the while by the 'cap,' or uppermost horizontal, always of rounded and not of split timber like the lower bars. If a bullock looks at any one 'in that tone of voice,' he receives an admonitory tap on the nose. But the blood of the 'ragers' is not yet hot enough for the desperate stage when they dare everything. So they merely acknowledge the blow by a savage dig into their nearest comrade's ribs.

Suddenly a bullock quits the outer edge at full speed,

and dashes at the yard. The herd burst after him like a charge of Cossacks. As if by magic, the stockmen form in line, and without a word of warning or command each man stands in his proper place. An advance in line is made upon the flying squadron. Yells, oaths, sticks, and lumps of clay are used to expedite the progress of the maddened animals towards the smaller yards. The leaders beholding a gate, recognise a trap and essay to turn. Vain hope! They are doomed to blind progression like the leaders of a democracy. They must keep in the forefront of the movement or be trampled under foot. Lost is all pride of place; they are forced on, sideways, backwards, even heels over head, through the gate by the maddened rear ranks observant only of danger from behind. Two men creep past along the fence towards the gateway, and at the exact instant upon which the recoil takes place, the rails are put up and secured, abruptly blocking the most forward bullock, whilst undecided whether to advance or retreat. Half of the herd is now enclosed in the forcing yards; the remaining moiety, returning, form a smaller ring, and recommence horning their friends where they left off. The men again are quietly sitting upon the 'cap,' where pipes are relighted, preluding a hand-to-hand encounter.

During these last proceedings Mr. Neuchamp transacted a slight experience in this wise. Armed with his hunting-crop, he had chosen the centre of the line, in view of the cattle. When the panic from the van became communicated to the rear, the whole body turned and rushed frantically back to their old position. The stockmen and black boys, well used to the movement, opened on each flank, leaving free egress. Mr. Neuchamp, less prompt and agile, found himself alone and opposed

to a legion of horned demons, going straight down his throat, it appeared to him, at the rate of 1 to 41. The leading bullock instantly appropriated him. Ernest, however, had 'seen his duty, a dead, sure thing,' and appeared truly anxious to perform it. Not to interfere with the 'ragers'' right to fair play, he made straight down the yard instead of cutting across at right angles.

Away, therefore, went Ernest Neuchamp, with a bullock, in sufficient training to win a moderate Derby, within two yards of him. It is admitted that a man under such circumstances always runs up to his best form. Therefore the decision 'by a short horn,' given by a sporting stockman seated on the fence, who kindly acted as judge on the occasion, created no surprise. Brooding over this occurrence, Ernest concluded to choose a position nearer to the fence on the occasion of the next drive.

Now another act commences. About fifty head have been run into the drafting lane and are ready for separating. The 'lane' is a long narrow yard about three panels wide and eight in length—a panel of fencing is not quite nine feet in length—immediately connected with the pound or final yard, and leading into it by a gate opening into the latter.

Two men have dropped down into the drafting lane, and are standing, one close to the gate, the other nearer to the cattle. The gateman wields a short drafting stick, not more than three feet in length, of approved toughness, his work being at *very* close quarters. This, the most onerous position in the yard, requires much the same qualities which the harpooner to a whaleboat must own. Quickness of eye, coolness, and daring are indispensable. His duty consists in preventing two or more cattle of

different classes from passing through the gate simultaneously. He is imperatively called upon to read brands, observe ear-marks, age, sex, taking due heed to preserve his own life withal. This, for instance, may suffice for an example. Several beasts are cut off by his comrade down the lane, with one only, perhaps, belonging to a different class. He marks the superfluous individual at a glance, but does not move till they are close upon him. Then, like lightning, he encourages those required by light but rapid blows. The bullock to be 'blocked' receives one on the nose which arrests him for an instant, just long enough to permit his comrades to move irrevocably through the gate. As the gate closes behind them another tap causes him to turn tail and fly to the rear. Whenever this 'pound' holds cattle of *only one class* you hear the deciding shouts from the cockatoo stockmen, who are doing the 'reviewing,' safely on the fence, of 'Fat,' 'Bush,' 'Stranger,' or 'Calf-yard,' as the case may be. At large musters for stragglers, you will also hear the further divisions of 'Up the river,' 'Down the river,' 'Over the river,' as well as 'Bush,' ring out in constant succession for hours; the last comprehensive direction being used for the station cattle. The unerring dexterity of the 'captain of the gate,' and his rapid disentanglement of the seemingly endless streams of violent brutes passing through the lane, fill Mr. Neuchamp with admiration, and demonstrate to him that this is a leaf of colonial experience hitherto by him unfolded. He and his mates have gathered their adroitness from a life-training, and are little less perfect with the drafting stick in their line than Cook with his miraculous cue.

'Ragers,' it may be explained, can only be drafted in two ways, or modes of separation—the stragglers or

strayed cattle being divided from them, in the interest of the attendant stockmen from the adjoining stations, who take them home after the muster is over.

Two gates leading from the pound at the far end are now taken charge of by the black boys, Boinmaroo and Piambook—the one answering to 'Bush,' the other to 'Strangers.' The gate from the lane is opened and the 'ragers' invited through. The invitation is accepted *en masse*, and in spite of two or three going down stiffened by a judicious blow behind the horns, they rush fiercely into the pound, and herd themselves on Boinmaroo's gate, taking it clean off the hinge and flattening out the primeval, who hangs on heroically.

Mr. Neuchamp, after 'they have all passed by,' over gate and boy, rushes out to recover the corpse. Before he reaches the fatal spot, however, that slippery heathen is up and flying round after the bullocks, and, indeed, after his pulverisation looking like a demon.

After a voyage of discovery round the yard at full speed, they return, best pace, into the lane, where they are permitted to calm themselves before the next attempt. When it is made, they behave better, though all the while keeping the drafters incessantly popping at the fence by truculent charges. One hand is stationed in the pound to pass the cattle through, where a gate is opened, —no sinecure, with this class of cattle, their rage and desperation being by this time beyond all bounds. Many a man has lost his life in performing this apparently simple task.

In addition to the ordinary and patent dangers to the yard, Ernest narrowly escaped, when sitting in a dignified manner upon the 'cap' of the pound—a substitute rail more than seven feet from the ground—being hooked off

by the scythe-like horns of an infuriated incorrigible. He was then and afterwards dubious as to whether his and Piambook's joint essay at improved cattle-drafting was a fair test of his theory, the energy and blood-thirstiness displayed by the present performers leading to a reconsideration of his system. However, with true British pluck, he will not desert his theory without further trial.

He had observed that in cases of 'charging,' the assaulted one merely jumped on to the bottom rail of the yard fence, held on by the top, and met the advancing foe with a seemingly unnecessarily cruel blow on the nose, in most instances causing effusion of blood. The blow, unless with a recognised 'bravo,' was sufficient to avert the charge.

Ernest took the first opportunity to volunteer for this post, which was freely accorded to him—the chief requisite being agility. With a light switch he betook himself into the yard. The first half-dozen shot through like cannon-balls, possibly not having cast eyes on the congenial prey. This state of affairs did not continue.

The acknowledged bully of the yard put his head down and charged into the pound like a whirlwind. The gate was shut and all hands seated upon the fence with marvellous celerity. This warrior was a very evil-looking beast—a tall, hurdle-built magpie brute, with a development of horn remarkable even in that forest of frontlets. One circle he made round the pound, tossing blood and foam from his nostrils on every side, savagely lunging at every one he passed on the fence, treating the heavy blows which, alas! from time to time fell heavily upon his bleeding face with superb contempt. As he passed Mr. Neuchamp that gentleman lightly dropped

behind him and switched him on the haunch, as a hint to move through the gate held open for him by Piambook. The mighty beast swung round. For one second his glaring visage seemed to say, 'I'll have your blood anyhow.' That second prevented the impalement of a hero of fiction! Ernest turned, and for the second time that day showed great pace. But when making a spring at the fence, between the pound and the lane, his foot slipped off the rail and he fell forward from the 'cap.' The maddened animal, seeing his victim escaping, gave a terrific bound and succeeded in planting his fore-feet on either side of Mr. Neuchamp, though his hind-quarters still rested on the ground. Here he made frantic efforts to clear the panel and Mr. Neuchamp, the agony and uncertainty of whose position were indescribable, as his gasping articulation testified.

But help was at hand. A stalwart Lachlan native sprang like a tiger at the beast's head, and with a few crushing blows forced him to stagger back into the yard. As he turned a comparatively light tap from a wattle drafting stick on the spine, behind the horns, dropped *l'ouragé* in his tracks, as if struck by lightning—his nostrils in the dust, his eyes turned backwards, and his huge frame quivering in every muscle. Slowly recovering his senses, he staggered to his legs, and perceiving Piambook standing in the middle of his gateway, as if inviting him to the feast, rushed blindly and with unabated fury at him. That astute aboriginal disappears from his gaze; he reels wildly through the gate on to his head, picking himself up in the next yard, where he meets with the usual sympathy from his companions.

Mr. Neuchamp is restored by the exhibition of a strongish dram. As he observes the last bullock enticed

out of the lane by having a bag thrown to him, which, after savagely driving his horns through, he carried forth thereon in triumph, he confesses that nothing short of hand-grenades, prepared with nitro-glycerine, can be esteemed suitable implements for the effective drafting of 'pigmeaters.'

The fray was finished. Enough had been done for glory, and even for some modest minimum of profit. The gates and sliprails of the yard are scrupulously secured, and all thoughts of work abandoned for the day. On the morrow a grand departure was carried out. The estrays or stragglers—a not inconsiderable drove—were escorted away by the stockrider contingent, who held a collective interest in them. And then, with much care and forethought, with horsemen in front, in flank, in rear, the gates were opened, and the swine-doomed multitude rushed forth, extremely lively, 'you bet,' but gradually assuming an appearance of sobriety as the purposely long day's journeying wore on.

'I call that a bit of first-rate luck,' propounded Mr. Windsor, 'getting all these rowdy old devils off the run in one muster, like this; thirty of 'em, let alone three hundred, 's enough to spoil the best herd in the country. There was some splendid fat bullocks—reg'lar plums—about that Back Lake camp—never saw primer cattle in my life.'

'Nor I,' agreed Charley Banks. 'I never set eyes on a better-looking run than this, let alone the saltbush. It don't appear to me to be half stocked, that's another thing.'

'We shall have to consider what is most necessary to be done next,' said Ernest, with a thoughtful expression. 'There must be many pressing things of importance, as

so little appears to have been thought of hitherto. The arrangements are simple, even to barbarism.'

Mr. Neuchamp was shocked that morning, on going into the meathouse, to find that the corned beef *cask* consisted of four upright round sticks, with a hide stretched across. In the deflected centre of this not particularly clean raw hide was placed above five hundred pounds' weight of salted beef. To this magazine the entire household resorted in its need. He at once made an item, 'Casks,' to be added to the tolerably long list of articles required for immediate use at Rainbar, which he trusted to obtain when the first drays should make their appearance from Sydney. He then sat down and wrote a long letter to Paul Frankston, in which he described the delivery of the station, not forgetting to chronicle his gratitude to Mr. Aymer Brandon for his exertions in his behalf, and his satisfaction at the liberal manner in which the former proprietor had behaved throughout the whole affair.

'I feel now,' was his concluding paragraph, 'that I am fairly launched as a pastoral proprietor, and I trust that I shall be able to combine a fair amount of profitable management with the reform of many objectionable practices and the improvement of station life generally, as it has hitherto obtained, on such distant properties as, up to this period, Rainbar may be considered to have been. A large present outlay will be unavoidable, but I feel certain that the increased profits, under improved supervision, will amply repay this and any future disbursement.'

'All very fine,' remarked Mr. Frankston to his cigar, as he put his young friend's letter into his pocket with a dissatisfied air, 'but if he commences to spend money

in accordance with his notions of what he calls improved management, he will soon run himself aground. That's not the way young Parklands worked the place when he went into it first, I'll be bound. It's extraordinary how every one who comes to this country of ours will persist in thinking that he has imported the first consignment of brains ever landed upon the continent. Well, I foresee that he will have his own way. If the seasons are good and cattle rise, he may pull through.'

'And if not, papa?' inquired the soft voice of Antonia, who had crept up to the old man's chair and placed her arm caressingly on his shoulder.

'And if not, my pet,' said that experienced colonist, with a subdued growl, into which he attempted to infuse the unfailing tenderness which invariably characterised his speech to his fondly-loved daughter, 'if not, why in three years our young and ardent friend will have to make a living out of his "plans for reform," for he will have nothing else left, as sure as my name is Paul Frankston.'

'Oh, don't say that, papa,' said Mr. Neuchamp's indulgent though sensible advocate; 'surely he is far cleverer than most of the young men that come out and turn squatters with just a "little experience," and see how well some of them have done.'

'It is not that he has a worse head, but I doubt most of all because of his better heart. That will destroy the balance. It's a bad thing for money-making. A man can make money, save money, or keep money, with just as few brains as will prevent him from falling into the fire. But let him have only as much more heart than his neighbours as would overbalance a nautilus, and money falls away from him like quicksilver. It's a fatal

defect, Antonia, my darling; and I'm afraid our young friend has it incurably.'

'It's a fault on the right side, at any rate!' said the girl, raising her head proudly. 'Those who think tenderly and faithfully concerning their fellow-creatures are not, perhaps, so clever with the "muck-rake" as self-seekers who bore and tunnel, like moles, all their lives, never turning their eyes towards the blue sky, the golden sun, or the glad waters. It cannot but be that those who have loftier aims should have some compensation even in *this* world; and if they are not so clever in helping themselves, why, their friends must help them all the more. Don't you think so, pappy dearest?'

'He—m!' answered the capitalist warily. 'That depends upon circumstances. Some people require a great deal of helping.'

'The greater triumph when they are finally helped into safety and success, and then they are sure to help others. Prosperity opens the hearts of really generous people more and more. By the way, how did Paul Frankston ever come to make any money? Tell me that, sir?'

'Have no idea, puss; all a fluke, I daresay. I don't think *he* would trouble his head much about it, except for the sake of a certain self-willed monkey, who ought to be in bed and asleep. Good-night, darling.'

## CHAPTER XIX

For the first few months after Mr. Neuchamp had commenced to sit upon the throne of Rainbar, there was a large amount of station work to do, which, at the instigation of Mr. Banks and Jack Windsor, was pushed on with and completed. There were any number of calves to be branded, outlying cattle to be got in, the herd generally to be mustered and made to 'go to camp' properly, as well as many other things necessary on a cattle station newly purchased, and which had not been, let us say, very exactly administered for some years past.

'It's my belief there's some of these LP cattle at every station within a hundred miles of Rainbar,' said Mr. Windsor one day, as he and Mr. Banks returned from a neighbour's muster, with a goodly number of cows, unbranded calves, and pen-branded bullocks. 'It was these last store cattle they got that seems to have scattered and made out all over the country. They say it came on very dry after they were turned out. Their horses was that weak they couldn't ride after 'em, so they had to let them go their own way.'

'Indeed,' said Ernest sympathisingly; 'they must have lost great quantities, or did they come back again?'

'They wouldn't come back, because they didn't know the run well enough to care about it over much. But they weren't teetotally lost, 'cause they've stuck at every herd they came to, and in course of time we'll have 'em all at home again.'

'You are sure they will not be lost?'

'Not a bit of it,' affirmed Mr. Windsor. 'A brand, once well put on, is like a direction on a letter. People may steal the letter, or kill the beast. But every one who don't go in for them tricks will help the owner of a stray beast to get him, if his brand is readable, just as he'd give you a letter addressed to you, if he was to pick it up on the road.'

'What will you do with these strayed cattle, then, when we get them home?'

'We must let them go again; there's nothing else for it. And I'll wager half of them will just turn and walk back again.'

'I have been thinking,' said Ernest meditatingly, 'that if we had a large paddock put up here, it would do capitally to keep strayed stock in, and for the horses. Surely it would save time.'

Jack admitted that an enclosure of the kind would be very handy for the class of cattle referred to, so Mr. Neuchamp at once made a note of a ton or two of wire for the purpose. Thus simply and unobtrusively was the 'Improvement Idea' initiated at Rainbar. Once admitted, it grew and enlarged into vast and even alarming proportions.

How many an ingenuous pastoralist has for years wandered innocently by the charmed ocean-strand of Arcady the Blessed, leading the careless, untroubled life which belongs of right to all true Arcadians, ignorant

alike of want or luxury, of debt, of anxious thought for the morrow! When, lo! in a luckless hour, unhallowed desire has urged him to the opening of the sealed, the forbidden casket which contained the Genie—'Improvement.'

The baleful Djinn, accursed of Solomon and many succeeding wise men, towers aloft, darkening the summer sky, and finally demanding the life of his deliverer. In the Eastern tale, the threatened victim cajoled the monster into re-entrance and brazen bondage. Rarely, alas! does the modern enfranchiser of the Demon succeed in enforcing retrenchment and safety!

Mr. Neuchamp had a general idea, based upon Paul Frankston's parting instructions, Mr. Levison's warning words, 'Don't you waste your money,' and even the half-careless hints of Brandon and Parklands, that his course as a squatter was to be guided by economy. At the outset, therefore, he merely ordered articles and implements absolutely necessary. He devoted his spare time to the task of instilling some glimmering rays of intellectual light into the unused but not opaque intelligence of Charley Banks. Finding that the boy had a strong taste for voyages and travels, he provided him with books of that particular department, and gradually had the satisfaction of seeing the lad settle down of an evening to steady reading, instead of to the eternal pipe, with perhaps an excursion to the kitchen and a not wholly improving gossip with Jack Windsor.

He drew him out, and invited him to the discussion of principles of action derived from the lives of his favourite heroes. He encouraged him to digest a certain daily quantity of 'stiff' or improving literature, and arranged that the more humorous celebrities of the day

were not wanting. He sketched a combination of reading and reflection, with the hard personal exertion and keen practical attention to detail which the youngster loved. He drew his attention to distinguished persons who combined excellence in both classes of attainment; and he demonstrated how poor and mean a goal is that of material success, unrelieved by mental progress or spiritual enlightenment.

But when all the calves were branded up, so completely that no more work, in that direction, could be done until more calves were born,—when all the stragglers were got in, and there were no musters to attend; as the days grew longer, the sun hotter, the whole routine more uniform and monotonous,—life commenced to be burdensome to Ernest Neuchamp. Then the fascinating idea of works and enterprises of a new and reproductive nature, like the temptation of a hermit in the Thebaid, arose with resistless might.

'After all,' he argued, 'if he were able, by his own contrivance and invention, to anticipate fortune for a few years, instead of dragging out endlessly a life, perchance meant for better things, was he not practising economy in the truest form?'

Such, after certain mental conflicts and long calculations, was the question which he answered to himself in the affirmative. From that hour he ceased to struggle with what appeared to be either a matter of destiny or the prompting of an enlightened self-interest, according to the mood in which he found himself when considering this momentous question.

The first operation foreign to the primitive, not to say barbarous, simplicity of the Rainbar establishment was the putting up of the paddock, at least double the

size which Mr. Windsor had suggested, for the safe keeping of straggling cattle. *Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte.* After that 'improvement' was completed and paid for by the crisp new orders out of the book furnished to Ernest by his agents, Messrs. Oldstile and Crampton, a highly unimaginative and trustworthy firm recommended by Paul, a new four-roomed cottage, of horizontal timbers, arose on the bank of the lagoon, to the great amazement of Piambook and Boinmaroo.

By this time a considerable number of the bush labourers of the period had found their way to Rainbar. Rumour, which disdains not the far interior, but indeed seems to be additionally sonorous in the remoter haunts of man, had sounded her trumpet-blast far and wide with reference to Ernest Neuchamp's acts and assets. The former were summed up 'as going in for no end of improvements,' and the latter were confidently credited with unlimited resources.

The next project possessed the merits of grandeur of conception and perfect novelty, at least in the neighbourhood of Rainbar, the inhabitants whereof might have been numbered among the most pious communities in the world, from their consistent dependence upon Providence, had their morals in other respects borne investigation.

Mr. Neuchamp had noticed that the Back Lake, as it was called, had evidently been filled recently by the overflow of the river, the waters of which had been conducted by a tortuous but plainly defined channel. The level of this inland sea, for it was of great extent, had lowered considerably since his occupation. In the event of a dry season it would doubtless become dry. Assuming this to take place, the cattle habitually watering

there would be thrown upon the world—would be reduced to betake themselves to the 'frontage.' 'Great inconvenience, perhaps loss,' so said Charley Banks and Windsor, 'would result.'

Then again, about ten miles from the Back Lake was another titular lake, dry at present, but with well-defined banks, bearing traces of having once been filled with water. This was called the Outer Lake. It was surrounded by splendid plains, but was only available for the stock during a short period in winter. This natural basin Mr. Neuchamp boldly proposed to fill from the Back Lake, after he had replenished that reservoir from the unfailing waters of the Great River.

After a careful examination and survey, he came to the conclusion that by deepening and cutting the curves of the 'blind creek,' or natural channel along which the waters of the flooded river had always reached the Back Lake, he could ensure the filling of that great basin in an ordinary season. Secondly, by a straight and not particularly wide or deep cutting connecting the two lakes, the outer basin could be filled as regularly and completely as the inner. Noting the levels, and computing the probable expense — considerably under its ultimate amount—Mr. Neuchamp retired to bed at an unusually late hour. But he carried with him the proud consciousness that he was destined to become the Lesseps of the Lower Darling. He slept heavily, but his dreams were troubled. At one moment Piambook approached, anxious to decorate his bosom with one of the brazen crescents which adorn the breast of confiding aboriginal royalty. At another, a group of officials and improbably well-dressed pioneer squatters gathered around him, with approving glances and well-filled

bumpers of champagne. Then Hartley Selmore smilingly proposed the health of the most original and successful engineer of the age, while Antonia Frankston gave the signal to raise a floodgate, which permitted the impatient waters to connect the farthest Australias.

Ernest had no sooner 'ciphered out' this fascinating project, than he found ready to his hand a considerable body of labourers, who in one way or another had been employed in putting up the cottage and the paddock. More strength was speedily available, as the report gained rapidly in sensation, until nearly all the peripatetic labour of the land had heard tell of the newly-arrived proprietor of Rainbar. He was impatient, it was said, to fence, dig wells, make dams, and cut canals, in all directions. So the able-bodied swagsmen hasted towards Rainbar, with the frantic fear of being too late which characterises the stampede for a 'new rush' among a mining population. Mr. Banks and Jack Windsor, and above all Piambook and Boinmaroo, were wildly astonished at the unfailing stream of tramps, of all sorts, sizes, and capacities, that poured in.

The blacks began to think that the King of England had made up his mind to take away Rainbar from Mr. Noojim, and that this was the vanguard of an army sent up to enter into possession.

Charley and Jack Windsor, sharing the prejudices of old-fashioned squatters against 'too many hands about the place,' looked grave. Indeed the latter ventured upon a mild remonstrance, as he sent man after man to work at the canal. Rations began to be served out in such quantities, that Charley Banks, who was storekeeper, had little else to do but to distribute. He stated his conviction that the flour would soon be gone if the

drain continued. 'Then,' he supposed, 'they would have to live upon beef and pumpkins until the next drays came up. Getting through work was all very well, but this was making the pace *rather* strong.'

'Don't you think, sir, excuse me,' said Jack one day, when a bag of flour and half of the last bullock had been served out in one forenoon, 'that we're getting rather too many knock-about men for a small station like this? It ain't my place, I know, to meddle with your ways of managing, and so on; but I've been on many a station, and I've never seen half, or quarter the muster we've got here lately.'

'I shall always be willing to hear and consider your opinion, Jack,' said his master, with that philosophic urbanity which distinguished him; 'you are a shrewd, sensible fellow, and, I know, faithful to my interest. But you *must* see that the cost of employing one man for fifty days, or fifty men for one day, is precisely similar. Excepting always that you save forty-nine days in time by the latter arrangement.'

'Well, that's right enough, sir; but, somehow, none of the gentlemen I know as has made money out of their stations never liked to see a lot of men being fed and paid and kept about the station, except for shearing or such like.'

'But don't you think the canal will be a splendid thing for the run, if we can get the river water to Outer Lake?'

'Well, sir, if it does, all very well, but somehow I don't seem to be quite sure that it will; and if cattle keeps low, where's the money to come from?'

'Whether cattle sell cheaply or otherwise, if we can get five thousand pounds' worth of water for five hundred, it pays well to lay out the money.'

'Ah well, sir, I can't say for that. But I think you might give it a thought whether these chaps are likely to do much of a day's work at this cutting, or whatever you call it. As long as they have their grub and their wages they'll hang it out, one again the other—regular Government stroke, as we say in this country.'

'But how can I arrange it otherwise?' inquired Ernest anxiously.

'Give it 'em by piecework,' replied Mr. Windsor confidently. 'You watch, now, how much half a dozen of the best of 'em does in a day. Measure it when you're by yourself; then run it off what it comes to at the wages and rations you pay. After that you can let it to 'em at so much a foot, or so much a rod, for them to "find themselves" out of the contract price.'

This very shrewd practical suggestion was, after consultation with Mr. Banks, finally adopted. The small army of excavators was informed that henceforth the pay would be at the rate of so much per cubic foot; that their rations, of whatever quantity, would be debited to them, as they would have to 'find themselves.' And that no departure from this scale of payment and charges would be permitted. After some grumbling, a little scheming, and a few departures, matters went on quietly. Mr. Neuchamp surveyed with satisfaction, week by week, the smooth-edged channel crossing the endless plain, destined, if all went well, to turn back-country into frontage, and so revolutionise custom and compel fortune.

After this great achievement was fairly on the road to completion, Mr. Neuchamp turned his mind to the dignified and fascinating science of horse-breeding. He had, in the comparative solitude of Rainbar, been revolving this vitally important question, dear to every

descendant of Britons in every quarter of the globe. He had been pained and grieved, of late, to observe that so few among the countless droves of equine forms with which the land was overrun were worthy the name of horses. They bore no approximation to the gallant, delicate-limbed desert steed of Arabia—as little to the stately, swift, and powerful animal that the science of English breeders has evoked from the questionable coursers of the past.

He looked around, inhaling the dry, pure, exhilarating breeze, and marked the wide expanse of sandy levels. He felt the fervid rays of the true desert sun. 'This,' he exclaimed, 'this is the climate, this the soil, the land, for the ancient royal desert blood, and no other. Here one might rear a race of gallant steeds, that would sweep tireless on from dawn to midnight.'

He recalled the magnificent performance of the two aged but high-descended mares, so wondrously described in the passage of the *Talisman*, when the Hakeem bears away his guest through the desert from the pursuit of the Templars. He thought with disgust of the sudden collapse, after only a couple of miles of sharp going, that his cob had treated him to, when the blue bullock thirsted for his blood. And vowing that, in days to come, no proprietor of Rainbar should suffer probability of so ignominious a doom, he was confirmed in his resolution to acclimatise a race of Australian Arabs at Rainbar, which, glorious in the present, should live in the future unsurpassable and immortal.

He ultimately arrived at the conclusion that it became the solemn duty of every man, placed by Providence in the enviable position of a pastoral proprietor, to do his best to provide the good land, to which he owed so much, with some lasting benefit or substantial legacy.

Mr. Neuchamp's bequest to the tutelary deity of Australia—plus the most improved shorthorns, which he was determined to promote, with his heart's blood if necessary—was to take the shape of a stud of Arab horses. In imagination, he saw them caracoling over saltbush plains and sand ridges, tossing their small expressive heads, waving their flowing manes and tails, while their clean, flat, everlasting legs and iron hoofs would be patent and admirable to every one who had sense enough to know an Angora goat from a deerhound. In the event of remounts, which were continually required for the Indian army, an entire regiment might be supplied from Rainbar in days to come.

Mr. Neuchamp gave the reins to this Arabian imagination, until he began to be oppressed with the crowds of princes and magnates of the earth, who came suing for the inestimable privilege of a charger from the Rainbar stud. Then he closed the day-dream. But the idea was fully developed, and he wrote to his agents to order a high-caste Arab sire, to be sent down at once from India. He then made arrangements for a number of well-bred brood mares, wherewith to make a commencement of the great Rainbar Austral-Arab stud.

The summer had come to an end; the autumn had fairly set in, when the time for mustering fat cattle arrived. That portion of the economy of a cattle station, so suggestive of coin, was safe to be attended to. This was perhaps the pleasantest description of work which had happened during the period of Mr. Neuchamp's proprietorship of Rainbar.

Under the apparent leadership of Charley Banks, with the aid of Jack Windsor, the neighbouring stockmen went forth on the war-paths, and the cattle were

duly mustered upon the Main camp, the Sandy camp, the Wild Horse camp, and finally at the Back Lake camp. No yarding took place. The fat cattle were to be duly separated, after approved custom, known as 'cutting out,' at each camp.

A muster for 'cutting out' is a novel and exciting scene for the stranger tourist. A cattle 'camp' is a rendezvous, used by a subdivision of a herd of cattle for purposes apparently of friendly gathering, converse, and social recreation—a Bovine Club. Sometimes the needful bare space, covering from an acre to half a dozen, is situated under shady trees; sometimes by the side of a river, marsh, or water-hole; sometimes on a naked sand-ridge, shadeless, waterless, alike destitute apparently of beauty and convenience.

The system of camp, with the aid of which the greater part of the work of every cattle station is carried on, would appear to have originated in the earliest days of colonial cattle-herding, the instinctive tendency of all cattle permitted to rove at will within certain limits being to assemble daily, generally as the heat commences to become oppressive, at a given spot, affording for the most part shade and water. Towards the decline of day the friends or acquaintances separate, each moving slowly on to its particular feeding-ground. A peculiarity of bush cattle, partly instinctive, partly the result of training, is to run to camp upon hearing alarming noises, or being disturbed at their feeding-grounds. Cattle in their natural state are exceedingly timid. Nothing is more common than for two or three hundred head, feeding at the outskirt of a large run, to start off in sudden alarm at the flight of birds, the sight of blacks, or the stampede of a mob of wild horses. At a moment's notice they are

off at full speed, which they keep up without 'crying crack,' as the stockmen say, until panting, and with heaving flanks, they can halt and 'round' up in the beloved camp.

Of this peculiarity advantage has been taken by stockmen, finding it a great aid to management, and a substitute for expensive stockyards and troublesome yard drafting. Thus one of the first things which an experienced stockman does when he is forming a cattle station, by herding the cattle upon it for the first occupation, is to regulate the camp. If he perceives that the cattle, after being turned loose, and no longer 'tailed' or followed daily as a shepherd does sheep of their own accord, 'take to,' or agree to prefer, certain suitable localities for camp, he wisely does not interfere. He merely observes and visits from time to time, but, traversing daily the outskirts of their beat, or by cracking his whip or using his dogs, rouses and alarms them, so training them to 'run to camp.' After a few months of this exercise he is moderately sure that on any given day he will find at a certain hour the larger proportion of each subdivision of the herd at one proper camp, and that almost every straggler will find its way to some rendezvous of the sort. If the camp be unsuitably placed, the stockman shoots a beast of no value, and leaves it upon the spot which he selects for a camp. He then makes a practice of driving the adjacent cattle to the spot two or three times a week. They are attracted by the decomposing carcass, around which they paw, roar, and trample, after the manner of their kind. Gradually the space immediately around is rendered bare. The cattle become familiarised to it as a daily lounge. They commence to run towards it, and of their own accord, and then the camp is formed.

Such is their origin and nature of formation. The advantage is patent. The driving of cattle, especially of a large herd, into a yard is always a troublesome, costly, and injurious process. The larger and fiercer cattle horn, crush, and sometimes fatally injure the weaker. Calves are hurt. Occasionally valuable cows are injured; even the strongest and fattest animals are not improved by the cruel goring and ceaseless crushing to which they are exposed during days or nights in the yard.

In camp-work there is little or no chance of oppression or hurt. After an hour's 'beating up,' and ringing of whips, streams of cattle are seen pouring in from every point of the compass towards, let us say, the main camp. Generally situated at no great distance from the stock-yard, this is supposed to be the central and principal trysting-place. From one side comes a long string of comparatively sober and peaceful cattle, comprising a goodly number of cows and calves. They trot leisurely, perhaps merely walk, until they reach the bare mound by the side of the long reed-covered lagoon, shaded by venerable white gums. There they halt or walk peacefully round and round. But stop—now far and faint more whips resound, which from time to time one hears like a tapping-bird or the snapping of dried sticks. Only the half-Indian sense of the bush-reared stockmen could say with certainty that these sounds were the volleying detonations of the mighty stockwhip, that terrible weapon in the hands of an Australian bushman. The sounds are louder, nearer, less ambiguous; the muffled lowing of a great concourse of cattle comes down the wind, mingled with shouts, yells, and strange cries. At length the herd gradually come—

Nearer still, and yet more near,
The trampling and the hum,

when suddenly there is a shout of 'There they come,' and a long line of magnificent bullocks, fiercely excited, breaks through the adjoining timber. On they come at a swinging trot, heads down, eyes glaring, in some instances tongues out, heading straight for the camp. Behind them is a great herd of mixed cattle, of which they are the advanced guard. There are so many of them that the 'tail' or rear is not at present visible. From the increasing whip volleys, the barking of dogs, and the shouts and cries of men, it would appear that the 'tail' is not actuated by the same lofty feelings of pride and courage which mark the 'head' of the column that has just dashed into camp in such distinguished fashion.

'My word!' said Charley Banks, 'that's something like a mob! What a lot of rattling bullocks, shaking fat too; this is my sort of cattle run; everything fat, from the calves upwards; as long as there's plenty of rain, there's no fear of the feed running short, and my opinion is that there's room for twice as many cattle as we've got—and more than that, if there was water at the back.'

'And I feel confident,' answered Mr. Neuchamp, who was surveying with an eye of satisfaction his camp full of well-conditioned cattle, 'that in less than two years there will be water all the way from the river to the Outer Lake. That will be something like an improvement, as you Australians call everything from a bark hut to a five-hundred guinea wash-pen.'

'I hope so,' said Mr. Banks, without any great show of enthusiasm. 'But improvements cost a deal of money,

and my old uncle used to say that the money ought to come first, in station management, and the improvements afterwards. He made plenty, but he never would go into debt, even for his wool bales. He used to lecture me for buying so much as a pair of hobbles without paying cash.'

'The principle is sound, no doubt,' replied Ernest thoughtfully. 'But it may be pushed too far; I think many of the older pioneers might have made all the money they did in half the time if they had only had sufficient foresight to organise plans of reproductive outlay, certain to pay cent per cent upon any money which they might have expended, or even borrowed at reasonable interest, for their construction.'

'Old Nunkey used to say that reasonable interest had a knack of growing into unreasonable interest if you didn't pay up half-yearly, which people often found something to prevent their doing,' said the prudent youngster. 'Of course, I don't know much about spending money—I never had any to speak of; but there's nothing beats a certainty, *I* think.' Here 'the tail' of the large lot of cattle of which 'the head' was so sensational and satisfactory, made their appearance, much gratified at being permitted to round up on the camp and mingle with the main multitude, with which they exchanged pushes, greetings, and salutations. Behind them rode Jack Windsor, accompanied by a band of picked volunteers, who, with him, had done an immense amount of outpost duty since sunrise.

It was considered reasonable to devote half an hour to rest and refreshment, which comprehended the calming down of the somewhat excited cattle, and a smoke for the stockmen. After this a disposition of forces was made.

Certain moderate performers were told off to encircle and keep within the camp limits the main body of the cattle, while 'the equestrian talent' was selected to carry out the more dashing and delicate duty of 'cutting out.' And few tasks had a more difficult appearance than to divide the fierce and wild-eyed bullocks from the mixed medley of a thousand head of cattle of all ages and sizes which crowded the camp.

First, Jack Windsor and a friendly centaur—part and parcel of a violent black mare—ran out half a dozen quiet cattle, placing them in charge of three other men, at about two hundred yards' distance from the camp. Then he, Charley Banks, and half a dozen of the best mounted men went in to the herd, and commenced to run out, singly or in pairs, such fat cattle as were up to the marketable standard.

Mr. Neuchamp for a while confined himself to riding usefully but unromantically round the cattle on the camp, preventing them from flowing out in unnecessary directions, and making off when the entertainment commenced to flag. He watched bullock after bullock being edged out by the trained horsemen to the rim of the camp, then suddenly forced into the open by the sure and sudden whip, which, silently raised, appeared to drop upon every portion of any given animal at once. As the roused animal commenced to stretch out into a gallop, to halt suddenly, to attempt to wheel in his tracks, it was a sight worth seeing to note the swift, wary, duplicate motion of the stock-horse, the watchful alertness with which the stock-rider reined his horse, urged, restrained, or checkmated the doomed bullock.

As Mr. Neuchamp gazed he came to the conclusion that the emigrant Briton, if young and active, might attain considerable ability in stock-riding. But as for

the lithe instinctive swaying grace with which horse and rider moved alike in desperate rush or wondrous whirl, it was unapproachable by any one 'not to the manner born.' One hour, two hours, passed, and still the same rapid and continuous selection of beeves went on. The once small drove of 'cut-out cattle' looked important and respectable. Then the bold idea struck Ernest that he too might as well do a little 'cutting out.' It was more exciting than pacing soberly round the mixed herd on the camp. Besides, it did not look difficult. He had only his hunting-whip with him. But he thought that the stockwhips were sometimes unnecessarily used; cattle he still believed were capable of being acted upon by gentleness and unvarying quietude of behaviour. So, taking Osmund by the head, who had had a certain amount of cattle driving at Garrandilla, and was handy enough, Mr. Neuchamp rode soberly through the herd to select a fat beast and distinguish himself in turn. Most probably he would have covered himself with glory, but it occasionally happens in this world that Fate seems to exercise all her ill intentions upon the knight even *before* he is fairly in the lists at the tournament. Surely no evil hap is so sore to bear as this. 'Had I but a chance,' says the stout champion, 'had I but lifted sword and held shield, I care not though Guy of Warwick were in the *mêlée*; but to be made captive ere the battlefield be reached, or one trumpet blast sounded in mine ear, that indeed is the utmost malice of destiny.'

Ernest, carefully guiding his steed through the third rank of staring or timid cattle, did not notice an old black cow with one horn sticking out from her head, who was regarding him with a fixed and gloomy stare. Her nerves had been much tried since she came into camp. She had

felt more than one savage cut of the stockwhip in acknowledgment of her ferocious demeanour and well-known character. She had been horned in the ribs and otherwise maltreated by ungenerous bullocks, who took that mode of requesting her to get out of the way. Her naturally morose temper had given way. She was perhaps unconsciously hungering and thirsting for the chance of avenging her wrongs.

As Mr. Neuchamp essayed to pass her with a view to getting out a noble red bullock of about eleven hundredweight, standing like a small elephant among the cattle, an uneasy steer on the farther side gave the black cow a vicious poke in the flank. This was the match required for the combustion. With a short bellow she sprang forward, and marking Ernest, not far out of her track, immediately went for him. Had he been in open ground he might have 'cleared' in time. But the closely-packed cattle embarrassed him. Had one of the stockmen been similarly placed he would with one of these same disapproved-of stockwhips have half blinded, and wholly checked, the cow by a ceaseless rain of precise and painful lashes across the face. But having neither whip nor elbow-room, Mr. Neuchamp was compelled to adopt the drifting policy. He tried ineffectually to outride this old black demon, whose ferocity did not require a stockyard, and then struck forcibly at her with the hunting-whip; but it was not long enough to reach her before she came to close quarters. When it did it had not the blinding fire of the properly-wielded twelve-stranded intimidator. He felt a sudden shock as the savage head struck violently against Osmund's shoulder. He held the excited horse together as he staggered, and the furious animal passed on. But he felt faint as he glanced at the straight horn

of the old witch, which was stained a bright crimson, and looking downward saw a stream of blood spouting thickly from his favourite's shoulder.

He leaped down in an instant, and seeing a deep stab in the centre of poor Osmund's shoulder, used his handkerchief for a plug, eventually managing to stanch the wound. As stiffness set in, the good horse began to limp. Jack Windsor being called over, a consultation was immediately held, when it was decided that the grey had got a nasty hurt, but that no danger was imminent, and that he would be as well as ever in a month. Much relieved by this verdict, Ernest sent the invalid home by Piambook, with strict instructions to go at the slowest of all possible walks, while he took possession of that gentleman's stock-horse himself.

When Mr. Neuchamp, with his friends, servants, and allies, reached his castle gate, otherwise the stockyard slip-rails, that night, he rode behind three hundred head of as fine fat bullocks of *his own* as ever were sent to the Sydney market. The first draft of fat cattle! Grand transaction! 'What would Courtenay say,' he thought, 'if he saw me in possession of a magnificent drove of cattle like this, all my own and just about to be turned into cash? Let me see, I expect to send away this year five or six such drafts. That will be—let me see—how much at £3 or even £3 : 10s. per head'—and then Mr. Neuchamp fell to calculating the number of calves he should brand this year—and the next, if the cattle went on increasing—the number of cattle he should send off, —and generally piling up Almaschar's basket to the greatest elevation which that tempting but insecure receptacle of riches would permit.

The fat cattle were duly despatched to market under

the charge of Charley Banks and Jack Windsor, Piambook accompanying them for the first fifty miles, to return when they might be supposed to be 'steadied' more or less to the road.

Mr. Neuchamp himself rode by them on the first day, and his heart swelled as the drove of grand-looking bullocks, all 'rolling fat,' as became a Rainbar draft, after a few fruitless dashes for return and liberty, paced quietly though with subdued swiftness along the far-stretching trail that did duty for the highway.

'There is something fascinating, it must be confessed, about this bush life,' he soliloquised. 'I don't wonder at youngsters running away to the bush, as long ago they did to sea. What a man, what a hero, a lad feels himself to be mounted upon a good horse behind a trampling drove like this. Sometimes, even at Charley Banks's age, he may be the owner of such a lot, and the lord of an estate of a hundred thousand acres (leasehold), where almost every one he sees belongs to his employment or dependency. The very numbers of the stock create a sense of responsibility and grandeur. There are three hundred and fifty head in this draft, not a large one. What would they think in England of seeing five hundred fat cattle in one drove, or even a thousand, like the one we met one day. "Where are these fine cattle from?" I remember saying to the stockman in charge. "From Yānga," said he, with an air of perfect explanation, as who should say from London or Liverpool. All well-informed persons, to his mind, must be acquainted by report, at least, with Yānga.'

Mr. Neuchamp's musings came to an end as he perceived that he was no longer needed, and must return, unless he proposed to spend the night away from home

without adequate cause, so he paced back ruefully to Rainbar, which fully presented the aspect of a lodge in the wilderness bereft of the cheerful converse of Mr. Banks, the versatile activity of Mr. Windsor, and even the open countenance and expansive grin of Piambook.

He had now before him the cheerful prospect of at least two months' entire solitude, not merely comparative, like an artist in a remote Rhineland or Norwegian village, but absolute, unrelieved, impossible of improvement, save by accident, as that of the keeper of a lighthouse.

It may be a matter of justifiable curiosity among those who have never led the eremitical lives which, 'for a season, and for that reason,' the proud pastoralist is occasionally compelled to endure, how, in this lone Chorasmian waste, Mr. Neuchamp contrived to spend his time. Something after this fashion, if I, who write, may transcribe a page of long ago, when the 'fever called living' was more recently induced.

He rose early, which, in the bush, means at or before sunrise. Glorious, in good sooth, is the early morn in the Australian wilds. Cool, clear, invigorating to the inmost nerve. Cloudless for the most part, and, before the mid-day sun asserts his might, perfect as a poet's dream of the serene untempested heavens of the isles of the blest. Granted that, at cattle stations in the far interior, it is *very* difficult to know what to do in the way of work, recreation, or exercise, when you are up. Some original thinkers have partly solved the problem by habitually lying in bed until they had just time to dress for breakfast.

But not of such mould was Ernest Neuchamp. He had already assured himself of profitable occupation for all the time that should intervene between leaving his

couch and taking the cold bath which preceded dressing for the day. He had determined that the garden at Rainbar should be one of the chief modes of reformation of bush habitudes upon which he was bent.

To this end he had, as early as such loading could be procured, ordered from town great stores of fruit-trees and plants befitting advanced horticulture, besides all manner of vegetable seeds, with a small assortment of flowers and shrubs.

He had caused to be trenched, and laid out in proper beds, a flat near the river through which the waters of that stream were led for purposes of irrigation. In this promising spot, in despite of the powerful sun-rays, the growth of all vegetation had been rapid and successful. He had therefore secured that perennial source of interest which a well-kept garden supplies to him who is fortunate enough to possess a taste for horticulture. In it he found a sufficiency of light labour for all the spare time which he could devote to it. Daily did he congratulate himself upon having in the wilderness one of the purest pleasures known to mankind—one which increases rather than fades with the lapse of years, and which richly repays both in result and occupation any outlay in its earlier stages.

He had therefore no difficulty in finding adequate scope for his energies during the early or the later unoccupied hours of the day. The chance wayfarer descried him in a rough seviceable suit, delving, weeding, or seed sowing in the fresh hours of the morning, or towards the coolness of the evening shadows. After a morning hour or more thus spent, he saw that his stock-horse for the day's ride was caught, saddled, and left ready for use. Then he proceeded to his bath, trans-

acted in a rough but sufficient bathroom, composed of slabs, and, fully attired for the day, sat down with appetite to the breakfast which the old hutkeeper had, somewhere about eight o'clock, provided for him.

He had succeeded in arranging the transit of a very fair library, comprising his favourite standard authors, with whom, including a regular instalment of magazines, he held converse during the principal part of the breakfast hour.

That pleasant prelude to the day's occupation over, he mounted his horse, and, accompanied by Boinmaroo or Piambook, set out upon his daily series of 'travels and sketches' through the somewhat extensive territory of Rainbar. Cattle stations are honourably distinguished by presenting some sort of work, if not always very onerous or important, to the attention of an active proprietor, all day long and every day. There was a little branding to be done. A few head of cattle needed to be run home, and regulated in some fashion. A bullock was required for killing. Stragglers were captured and deposited in the paddock, weaners, milkers—what not.

In fact, so engrossing and interesting became the management of the herd, and the exploration of every hole and corner of the run, that, joined to the overlooking of the men working at the canal, the sun was generally low before Ernest and his attendant returned, with a consciousness of having done more or less a day's work, and with a remarkably good appetite for the corned beef, damper, and tea which composed his chief meal, and indeed all other refections.

In the evening he was again free to enjoy, without fear of interruption, the intensified delight of the lonely scholar, whose books to 'him a kingdom' are. His cor-

respondence became more voluminous and grateful than he had ever known it to be heretofore, and when the hour arrived for repose, Ernest Neuchamp retired, secure of dreamless sleep and of that cheerful awakening with the dawn known only to the sharer of 'respectable pleasures and respectable labours.'

Such, day by day, was the free untroubled life of Ernest Neuchamp at that stage of his fortunes when, untroubled by care or consuming anxiety, with gay hope in the future, tranquil enjoyment of the present, youth told itself a hundred times each day that the present was fairer than the fairest mortal mistress; while age and care stood dimly gazing afar off, nor ventured to enter the paradise which is rarely sacred from their intrusion when the downward slope of the days of the years of our pilgrimage begins to be travelled. So pleasant is the flowing ascent to the mist-shrouded pinnacle of the moments known as success. There, for we behold it in no other spot on earth, we fondly deem that happiness abides. If that haunting presence, unearthly bright, there displays her charms who shall say? Let those who have reached the spot whence can be descried the kingdoms of the earth and the glory of them declare!

The days, the weeks, passed smoothly, swiftly away, until at length Charley Banks and Mr. Windsor return, in high spirits, the cattle having 'topped the market,' and sold extremely well. With the exception of occasional branding and taking heed that the cattle who wandered about 'on parole,' and were not restrained by any fences, did not go away from the run altogether and irrecoverably, there was little indispensable work to do. The selection and delivery of the fat cattle was the most

difficult of their station operations. It had been demonstrated that this could be successfully transacted by the present staff.

After the gallant drovers returned, a fortnight was spent in looking through the herd generally. This done, there did not appear to be any possibility of fresh work for two or three months; in fact, not until it was time to make another draft of fat cattle.

'I see now,' said Ernest, to that constant and sympathetic confidant, himself, 'the mistake of the pioneer settlers of the Australian interior; they narrowed their mental vision to the mere actual facts of their positions; they discarded change and resisted enterprise. Now the obvious course which would occur to any man of intelligence and forethought, anchored for years of his life in a primeval waste such as this, would be to develop his property to the fullest extent compatible with his pecuniary safety. Then, at the first favourable turn of the market, he might sell out to advantage, free either to repurchase a cheap unimproved property, or to betake himself to the intellectual elysium of the Old World—that abode of art, science, literature, classical glory, perfected luxury.' Here Mr. Neuchamp checked himself with an involuntary sigh, and sternly pursued his original line of thought.

'Instead of which,' as the country Justice said, 'they went on year after year, in one dull endless round of life, subsisting metaphysically upon the bark and green-hide substitutes for all that men, in other places, hold dear; without society, without books, without expectation of quitting their desert life, what wonder that when middle life is reached, ere Fortune smiles on the lone hermit of the waste, she should find him with tastes obliterated,

sympathies wasted from long disuse — with the whole general mental endowments hopelessly deteriorated? How different might be the lot of an ardent and instructed man,' pursued the enthusiast — 'zealous to make the most of the light that was in him; keen to aid the advancement of his kind, to help the tardy progress of virtue and human truth. With the materials ready to his hand, he might complete pastoral experiments yet undreamed of, raise the moral tone of his employees, and through them of the land generally, render his homestead the headquarters of philosophical experiment and liberal life and culture collaterally with these lofty aims: such a man might place his future prosperity on a firm basis.'

There are some persons who possess the enviable power of being able to raise the most imposing imaginative structures upon any pedestal of assured stability, no matter of what size. The satisfactory sum which the first draft of fat cattle from Rainbar had realised provided Mr. Neuchamp with such a prosperous future, by the simple process of multiplying their numbers and periodical result, that he felt himself now to be fully justified in undertaking any number of reproductive enterprises.

## CHAPTER XX

When the first instalment of stores, of a very mixed and comprehensive description, arrived from Sydney, in three drays drawn by ten bullocks each, Mr. Neuchamp was much impressed by the teamsters. They were brothers who had left their farms in the settled districts for this arduous but profitable undertaking. Finer specimens, outwardly, of the native Australian it would have been difficult to find. Tall, powerful, well-built fellows, they were just the men fitted to found 'a bold peasantry their country's pride.' Their appearance at Rainbar hastened the action of one of Ernest's long-cherished plans. He had always intended, when arrived at the dignity of a proprietor, to establish a rural population in the vicinity of the home station. In time to come their residence and occupation would add value to his land. Available labour would be at hand whenever he required assistance. And a consideration, dearer to the heart of Ernest Neuchamp than aught other—he believed fully in his power, by this means, to elevate his fellow-man in the social scale, to aid both in his material and mental advancement.

In conversation with the brothers, he gathered that they had each a small farm 'down the country,' as they

called it, where they kept a few cattle, raised reasonably regular crops, and generally lived an independent but unprogressive life. They admitted that they were pressed for room, and in a bad season lost many cattle. 'How should you like to have a half section each on that flat which you see there?' inquired Ernest, with the light of sanguine benevolence in his eye. 'Your cattle would increase, and in a few years you might be well-to-do, prosperous men.'

The Australian yeoman, as he may fairly be called, is not wholly dissimilar to his American cousin, though the type is, as yet, not noticeably divergent from the Anglo-Saxon. Slow of speech, his reasoning faculties, within fixed limits, are active and vigorous. Concerning matters which relate to his personal or pecuniary welfare, a more shrewd, cool-judging individual does not exist. Well skilled in the valuable art of holding his tongue, he asks but few questions. He asserts little. But, if you happen to have the arrangement of a bargain in stock or land, or of a contract for carriage or bush-work, with the rural Australian, you will rarely find that the apparently impassive countryman has 'got the wrong end of the stick.'

So, when Mr. Neuchamp made the somewhat unusual offer to Abraham Freeman and his brothers, William and Joe, of permitting them each to conditionally purchase three hundred and twenty acres upon the river-flat, below the house, himself finding the cash for the first deposit payment, they quickly ran over the advantages in their own minds, and came to the conclusion that the 'cove,' or proprietor, was an inexperienced swell, whom Providence had delivered into their hands. They realised the fact that, though cultivation was not likely to flourish in

a land where it did not rain, sometimes, for six months, they would be able to keep as many cattle as they liked. From merely legitimate increase, not to speak of chances, such as always occur near large herds, they might look forward to a snug herd each in four or five years. They would have a place to keep their teams, and might continue their carrying uninterruptedly. They could by no possibility lose much, and might gain largely, by accepting Ernest's offer. Still, with characteristic caution in 'making a deal' of any sort, they spoke hesitatingly.

'Well. I don't know, sir, about coming up here for good,' said the eldest brother. 'Our place down the country is comfortable like, and the cattle do middling well' (half of them had died during the winter from cold and starvation). 'I don't know how my wife would like it either.'

'I should be sorry to urge a removal from anything very pleasant as a homestead,' said Ernest; 'but I thought, perhaps, that you might have the advantage here of more land, and the opportunity of getting on faster in life—of course you will, and have the carriage from the station.'

'I believe it might be worked,' said Bill Freeman, the second brother, an astute personage, who thought that they might now begin to be persuaded into accepting their good fortune. 'Certainly it's thundering hot, and a long way over these blank plains. But likely Mr. Neuchamp will have a bit of bush work or fencing ready for us when we come up. It's poor work laying out all our bit of money on a bit of land and have nothing to fall back upon.'

'I daresay I shall have something going on,' said Ernest, who, now that he was possessed by the 'improve-

ment' demon, saw in his mind's eye many new buildings and fencings *absolutely necessary*. 'Of course you will have the preference when any such is given out.'

'Then it will be all right, sir,' said Abraham Freeman, 'and when we take up the land, you'll be ready to advance the eighty pounds for the deposit on each half section. We can pay it back in work and carriage by degrees like.'

'Oh, of course we can pay it back in a year or so,' said Bill.

'Certainly; I said so when I mentioned the subject first,' said Ernest, 'and I shall be prepared to carry out my promise.'

'Then, after the crops are cut,' said Abraham Freeman, unable to repress a slight look of satisfaction, not to say exultation, 'we'll make a start up, and bring our few cattle with us. They're crawling, quiet things, and won't give no trouble to any one.'

'Very well, that is settled,' said Ernest, concluding the interview—satisfied that he had secured the nucleus of a contented and substantial tenantry, more common in England than in Australia.

So the namesake of the great Sheik Ibraheem, who first depastured his stock upon the waste lands of the period, departed with his brethren and oxen.

Mr. Neuchamp, with a feeling of conscious success, related his achievement to Banks and Jack Windsor. Somewhat to his disappointment the former made no remark, and the one made by the latter consisted of certain mutterings suspiciously resembling profuse oaths, ending with a declaration that 'he'd have seen Abe and Bill Freeman, not to mention that planting rascal Joe, jolly well —— first.'

The sequel of this philanthropic arrangement adjusted itself after this fashion. The brothers Freeman, as soon as they reached home, took measures for selling off their holdings, the proceeds of which they invested in as many cattle from their neighbours as, added to their own, made up a herd of more than a hundred and fifty head, exclusive of thirty-six working bullocks. They also 'gave the office' to a brother-in-law and such of their neighbours as were willing to go into a little speculative land selection. The upshot of which was that, within a year after the proposal to the Messrs. Freeman, Ernest had the satisfaction of witnessing the taking up of half a dozen other selections of three hundred and twenty acres each upon the best part of his frontage. This occupation gave the selectors a legal right to about six thousand acres of 'pre-emptive right' suitable for the pasturage of five or six hundred head of mixed cattle and their probable increase.

Charley Banks openly demurred to all this as very likely to lead to complications as to calves, and stated his opinion plainly that the young lads, of which there were two or three in each family, would be always galloping about the run when not wanted, looking for a horse, a strayed bullock, or with any excuse in fact that happened to come uppermost. He had seen it tried before, he averred, and it had not answered. Free selectors were all very well, 'like measles and fevers,' when you got them in the ordinary course of things; but as to paying to catch them and helping them to come into your place, it was likely to end in a losing game. But Mr. Neuchamp had still great faith in the inherent excellence of human nature, and overpowered Charley with arguments which the youthful Conservative

distrusted but was unable for the present to answer. He contented himself with prophesying that there would be a store and a public-house next at the Long Reach. This of course would end in a surveyed township, and a reserve for travelling stock, by means of which they would lose the use of one of the best watering-places and camps on the run.

Ernest had at first floating ideas of running down to the metropolis during the hot months, for—for—some one of the many reasons which generally gather additional force about January or February at the latest. But really, when the time came, there was so much work of various sorts going on that he prudently thought he had better stay at home for another year until he could leave everything in full working order, and go forth 'on pleasure bent' with a clear conscience. He arrived at this conclusion somewhat unwillingly; but he did so from the class of motives which chiefly actuated him, and so settled the matter.

Months rolled on. The many drafts of fat cattle had been mustered and sent away in satisfactory succession. All was realised for that source of income that could be relied upon for one season. The improvements of various sorts had been completed and paid for, this latter process adding up to a much larger sum than had been originally calculated upon. The cutting to the Outer Lake had also been finished according to contract. The cash payment for this same piece of civil engineering for the first time aroused a feeling in Ernest's breast that perhaps he was spending money rather faster than it was made, that it was a scale of proportionate outlay that could not be continued indefinitely. Nothing was more necessary in Mr. Neuchamp's opinion than to improve the breed of

cattle existing at Rainbar. To that end he had purchased a small but costly shorthorn stud. He had written to his brother Courtenay to send out to him certain animals of the purest procurable Bates blood. All things had been done that in the eyes of an intelligent public would eventually distinguish Rainbar as a model cattle station, with prize stock and unrivalled improvements. In the future was a plain certainty of trebling value and carrying capacity.

Thus far matters had gone on with undeviating regularity in all respects as where the stock were concerned. Mr. Neuchamp found that whenever his account with Messrs. Oldstile and Crampton needed replenishing on the credit side of the ledger—a position of affairs of which he was informed with much precision and regularity —he had only to muster for fat cattle and despatch a draft to market. He began to believe that such was the invariable state and condition of things. He wondered why all cattle-holders did not make rapid fortunes. He wondered why doubt should be expressed about the expediency or otherwise of investing in such a steadily profitable speculation; and inasmuch as his brandings became more numerous each quarter, far more than replacing the numbers sent away for sale, it amazed him to think how such an easy and pleasant way of doubling or quadrupling capital had not simultaneously entered the brain of every man of average intelligence in Australia.

He was now to learn that other factors in the calculation existed. The first slight ripple of the tidal wave which might or might not overwhelm was the remark of Charley Banks one day that they had had no rain for a month; that the appearance of the weather indicated

none for another month, 'in which case,' said Mr. Banks, 'the grass would go back.'

'I had not remarked it,' said Ernest, looking up (it was breakfast-time) from an interesting article in the *Fortnightly Review*. 'Now you mention it, it does seem rather dry. However, I suppose we shall soon have rain.'

'I'm not so sure of that,' said Charley; 'it looks very like setting in dry, and what's more, Jack Windsor thinks the same, and the blacks say "big one water, longa lake dry up, like't long time"—that looks bad.'

'And suppose it does,' said Ernest, cutting his *Review* carefully, 'surely there will be grass and water enough on the run for all our stock?'

'Not so sure of that. In this part the grass goes all to nothing in a dry year, breaks off, and blows away, making the country look like a brick-field. Besides, I was reading in Sturt's *Exploration*; capital book it is'—(Mr. Banks had been craftily led into the path of literary exercise by tastes of travel and adventure, of which line of action he was passionately fond)—'well, I was reading that the year the Captain went down the Murrumbidgee first, 1827, was a terrible drought—worse than anything we have had since. That year was the driest summer in England known for a century.'

'What of that?'

'Why, didn't you tell me that your letters from England, the last mail, said they were having an awfully hot season *for them*, brooks nearly dry, people having to cart water ten miles, and so on. Well, *our summer follows theirs* in a kind of way six months after. So I'm afraid we are in for a regular dry season, if not a drought.'

'And does that make so much difference?' asked Ernest coolly. 'This seems a dry country at the best of times: Nature should be equal to any emergency in that line, from the practice she ought to have had in this topsy-turvy continent.'

'My word, and so she is in a general way,' said the youngster, standing up for his native land. 'But a drought, the real thing I mean, a dry summer after a dry winter, is something awful. I can recollect one when I was a little chap at school, and that was something I never forgot.'

'What was it like, Charley? I'm never afraid of facts; half the evil of life arises from not looking *them* in the face.'

'Well, but some facts frighten you like a ghost does, however straight you may look them in the face,' said the lad. 'In the year I remember, lots of squatters lost their stock to the last head, and were ruined out and out. There was no beef or mutton fit for a blackfellow to eat. Flour was a hundred pounds a ton, and had to be mixed with ground rice. All of us boys were taken from school because bread was too dear—not that we cared about that. Nobody could sell anything. People almost forgot what money was like, there was so little of it.'

'We must hope for the best,' said Mr. Neuchamp firmly, though, as he was speaking, an unpleasant thought flitted through his brain of how he should make things pleasant with Messrs. Oldstile and Crampton, if the easily negotiated drafts of fat cattle could no longer be collected from Rainbar camp. 'We may have summer rains or thunder showers; the least thing seems to cause the herbage to grow hereabouts.'

'We *may* have,' said Mr. Banks doubtfully, 'but it

don't look likely to me. If you have noticed, it has turned cloudy and dark-looking, and all passed off again, a dozen times within the last month or two, and that's as bad a sign as could be.'

Mr. Neuchamp revolved the unpleasing idea thus presented to him much and often in the days following this eventful dialogue. With a sudden flash of perception he saw his course of unchecked improvement and disproportionate outlay in remorseful clearness.

Had he then, in despite of the respectful but marked disapproval of both of his faithful subordinates, experienced in the ways of the land, been steering obstinately on a course with a rock ahead plainly visible to their clear if not far-reaching vision? Would he really find himself landed in a labyrinth of debt, like so many unlucky squatters that he had *heard of*, from which all attempt at extrication would be vain without the total sacrifice of his investment? He felt like a reckless mariner who, having disregarded the cry of breakers ahead, had carried on madly until the fatal crash was heard, and the good ship, dreadfully immovable, lay broadside on to the remorseless billows.

With returning daylight, however, the retrospective reverse having occupied the hours of a sleepless night, came firmer resolves, and even some faint signs of hope. Surely even his rigid agents would advance what money he needed upon the security of his fat stock to come. If they were not to be moved to the disbursing point, his brother Courtenay might permit him to draw upon him for a couple of thousand pounds. That would completely set him free from pressing liabilities, and would be amply sufficient to carry on with until another crop of fat stock should ripen, till this present abnormal state of matters,

with the drought-bound herd of cattle, became a thing of the past.

The days, the weeks, passed on without any alteration of the weather, except what might be considered a passing from bad to worse. Hot days, cool days, windy days, cloudy days, came and went, but no rainy days, although often the sky looked dark, and storm-clouds rolled up in great battalions, only, alas! to scatter, break up, and flee before the sun's rays like a barbarian army at the sight of a dreaded enchanter.

Certain effects commenced to follow the gradual and complete desiccation which pervaded the soil. The grass withered, became brittle and sapless, then blew away before the breath of the harsh hot wind, leaving the red earth bare, baked, and 'much more like a brick-field' (this was Jack Windsor's simile) 'than a first-chop cattle-run.'

The Back Lake commenced to dry up, and the weaker cattle sank by scores in the mud, and either died or were extricated with difficulty. The strange cattle came into the frontage, and strove with the *habitués* of that locality for the very scanty pasture which was left.

Great hordes of travelling sheep laid waste a portion of the run, eating every available particle of herbage within a mile of either side of the road. At first Ernest was inclined to treat these devourers of every green (or dry) thing with consideration, but found that he would speedily possess a herd of cattle and no appreciable grass for them to eat if that policy was persevered with. So Mr. Banks had orders to 'shepherd' every lot through the run, and to describe the proprietor as a violent and ferocious person given to impounding and every legal oppression.

With the colony of selectors amicable relations commenced to be endangered.

Their cattle, having much increased, required a considerable range of pasture. Their owners commenced to grumble if the Rainbar cattle fed over their grazing rights, quite unconscious of their wholesale unnoticed trespass up to the present time. One of the conditional purchasers, indeed, after a brisk argument with Jack Windsor, informed that gentleman that grass was grass now, and that they intended to stand upon their rights. They were poor men, and couldn't see that they were to starve their cattle for Mr. Neuchamp or Mr. Old-champ either. If he hadn't expected to get some pull out of them, he would never have persuaded them to come there. They didn't see as they owed him anything.

This was one of the unkindest cuts of the very hard fortune of the hard season. Ernest felt the ingratitude of his 'plantation' settlers more deeply than any one of them could have supposed.

To make matters pleasanter, he received a letter from Messrs. Oldstile and Crampton, informing him that his account was overdrawn, and that he could by no means have any more money until the credit side of his balance was substantially reinforced.

He was commencing to fall upon evil days, certainly. What to do he did not exactly know. He was unwilling to write to Paul Frankston and state the case. It would have appeared like a simple asking for a loan. He was ready enough to accept Paul's advice, friendship, and hospitality. He did not wish to be directly indebted to him for money.

And yet, *quoi faire*, without an advance of some sort? For, even on cattle stations, where you are not

always putting your hand into your pocket, as with sheep, various occasions for expenditure arise, and money is indispensable.

He had been sufficiently learned in the ways of land to know that store cattle were nearly always saleable, and that one could generally dispose of a large lot more easily than fat ones. But during this terribly dry weather, he reasoned that no one would desire store cattle at any price. Buyers were uncertain as to *when* it would rain, and would delay making purchases until definite assurance of a change of weather. Of fat cattle he had none; they had enough to keep themselves in a pinched, independent manner, but no more. The situation resolved itself into this: money must positively be raised for station expenses for the next six months.

After much extremely unpleasant cogitation about money, for the first time in his life, Mr. Neuchamp finally decided to write to Messrs. Oldstile and Crampton, stating his position, and his reasonable expectation of receiving aid from his brother in England. He made this explanation, requesting at the same time that they would permit him to draw for the sum of five hundred pounds in advance, on the strength of five thousand pounds which he had grounds for expecting that he would obtain from his brother.

This important letter being despatched, Ernest felt more at ease than had been his lot for some time past. In money difficulties, like other matters, the chief misery lies in the stage of doubt or procrastination. This being passed, and a definite course of action entered upon, mental relief ensues. Happy the man whose temperament leads him to bestow the same amount of curative anxiety upon the earlier stages of 'chest complaint' that

the majority are compelled to furnish during the more aggravated phases of the disorder.

Mr. Neuchamp, to do him justice, was not a man consciously to remain within the borders of a fool's paradise. Once aware of the necessity for strenuous exertion, he was unhappy until progress had been made. He had previously written an explanatory letter to his brother Courtenay, not defending his somewhat free expenditure, but owning candidly that the sudden change of the season, with the collapse of the marketable portion of the herd, had taken him by surprise, and reduced him to a state of virtual, though temporary, insolvency. 'However,' he added, 'my herd of cattle has increased considerably, both in number and quality, since I purchased, and I anticipate—though I own I was mistaken about the time when they would become remunerative—that my enterprises and outlay for labour will eventually prove sources of extraordinary profit. At the same time,' he added, 'it is my duty to tell you that I cannot speak with any certainty as to when repayment of your loan may take place. The seasons here are variable and irregular, the price of stock low and high by turns. All I can do is to pay you Australian interest, which is much higher than in England, and to promise to return your capital when times improve. I shall never reproach you if you do not lend me your money, as I do not wish to disguise from you that it is uncertain whether you ever see it again. But if you do not, and I fail to obtain accommodation in any way, Rainbar must be sold, and I shall be ruined.'

Mr. Neuchamp, regarding his letter when written, did not like the look of the last sentence, nor the rather uncomfortable last word. So he cast about for another

sentence or two of less obnoxious suggestion. In this extremity he bethought himself of a certain lady-cousin, Miss Augusta Neuchamp, a damsel of very well-defined opinions and courageous propagandism, with whom he and Courtenay had been much at war—she having a full share of the family obstinacy of purpose. So he wrote, 'Give my love to Cousin Augusta, and tell her that she would like Australia uncommonly, in some respects. It presents a great field for her peculiar crazes.'

This important letter despatched, there was nothing for it but to do the waiting on Providence as patiently as was possible to a nature constitutionally averse to suspense and uncertainty. Something of the romance of the kingdom of Rainbar had departed, when the throne and crown jewels were liable at any time to be taken in execution. Its ruler commenced to experience those various throbs and spasms, the preliminary pangs, headaches, and heart-aches, which assail all travellers through the Valley of the Shadow of Debt!

He was not doomed, however, at this particular period of his pastoral existence, to be kept long in the torture-chamber. For Isaac of York there was a Wilfred of Ivanhoe 'round.'

In due course a letter arrived from Messrs. Oldstile and Crampton, to his great joy, that they had acceded to his request, on the strength of remittances arriving from England; that the sum named was now at his credit; but—but—they trusted that he would not exceed the sum referred to, before paying in money to the credit of his account current, as, they regretted, it would not be in their power, under *any circumstances whatever*, to exceed that advance. And they were his faithfully, etc.

'Hang their "yours faithfully,"' banged out Ernest,

in the overflowing expansion of the moment—borrowing a hitherto avoided colonial habit—'why do people who would not stretch out a hand to save one from beggary call themselves "yours truly or faithfully"?—"truth and obedience" for ever on their lips, and how little of either is ever exhibited. However, I am to have the money for the present, and that will last me to the end of the year, by which time the heavens or Courtenay may come to the rescue of Rainbar.'

The pecuniary aid of his formal agents, though grudgingly given, was timely and valuable. Ernest determined to economise, with a view to make the relief fund last as long as possible. Taking a hint from his maritime experiences, he proceeded to shorten sail while such signs of storm and tempest were observable in the financial horizon — a policy highly to be commended, but, like many of our good resolutions and better deeds of this mortal life, ever prone to be late of arrival. So life again flowed on at Rainbar in a monotonous round of daily duties, which the increasing severity of the season rendered tedious and troublesome, but not exciting. The weak cattle were dragged out of waterholes and creeks; the locust hordes of travelling sheep watched and followed, lest they cleared off the poor remains of the dying pasture. Musters were in abeyance until 'the rain came.' The drought still remained unbroken. The great canal remained as innocent of water, and as unlikely to be filled, as if it had been constructed between the tanks and the desert gate of Aden. Every superfluous station hand had been 'hunted,' to use Charley Banks's phrase—in fact, that young man had very strongly expressed his idea in favour of contraction of the strength of that department.

So that the pleasant spectacle was presented of the station work being done by the smallest practicable staff, viz. the proprietor, Charley Banks, Jack Windsor, and the two black boys.

In the midst of this state of matters a stranger appeared one day, whose knocked-up horses showed plainly in their very visible anatomy the effects of a long journey and indifferent keep. Mr. Neuchamp hasted to welcome the 'guest sent by Allah' with true Arab hospitality. Considerably to his surprise he recognised the sun-burned, grave visage of his quondam travelling companion, Mr. Abstinens Levison. That gentleman's reflective countenance relaxed somewhat as he shook hands with his host, and relinquished his way-worn steeds to Mr. Windsor's good offices.

'So you're the man that bought Rainbar,' said he with mild acquiescence. 'I heard that a young Englishman had cleared out Parklands. Smart fellow he is—gone in for a whole country-side on the Darr. Sure to do well when we get rain again. He and I have had many a deal together. Got the best of me once in a big lot of store cattle, and it ain't many men that have got that to say of Ab. Levison.'

'Very glad to see you, Mr. Levison,' said Ernest heartily. 'Come in and make yourself at home. Which way are you travelling in this terrible season? No wonder your horses have had enough of it.'

'Just about done, and that's the truth,' made answer Mr. Levison slowly, and with consideration. 'I'm on my way to Mingadee, a place of mine down the river, about a hundred miles from here. I shall have to walk and carry my swag, for the horses, poor things, are as weak as cats. If I hadn't come through the back

country, where I knew a few spots where there's feed in all seasons, such as it is, they'd have knocked up before now.'

'Walking is becoming quite fashionable,' said Ernest; 'people are coming round fast to my way of thinking, that we were intended to use our legs in some other way than lolling upon a horse all day. I saw a police trooper trudging past to the Quarter Sessions at Warren last week, with a good part of a hide (evidence in a cattle-stealing case) on his back. The mail had stopped running. He told Jack one of his horses was dead, and he was as able to carry the other as the poor brute was to carry him. But you won't have to walk this time, if you'll stay with me to-night. We have a horse or two left, and I can give you one that steps as fast nearly as the roan you were good enough to lend me near Nubba.'

'All right,' said Mr. Levison. 'I'd not be particular about it; only I'm a little pushed for time. I have to meet a man about a largish lot of stores that we're dealing over.'

'Buying store cattle in the teeth of a season like this!' exclaimed Ernest in astonishment. 'Why, it's a hard matter to keep alive one's own, I should think.'

'Look here!' said the man of original mould, commencing on the lunch which had been provided for him calmly but with decision, as if the back country that he mentioned had been better provisioned for the quadrupedal than the human part of his equipment. 'It's always been a way of mine to act different from other folks in the way of buying and selling stock. I can recollect the markets for many years back. I've seen sheep at all prices from a shilling to a guinea, and cattle in proportion. My rule is—I don't mind telling you,

for *you'll* never do much in the dealing line—my rule is, to buy when every one wants to sell, to sell when every one tries to hold on; and it's paid me, so far. That's good damper of yours; your cook kneads it up well, that's half the battle.'

'He's not a bad fellow in his way,' asserted Ernest; 'but he will soon have very little flour to knead. Drays can't travel, and we shall have only South American fare directly, beef and water. Certainly we have plenty of pumpkins, that's the advantage of a garden.'

'Couldn't have a better thing. Lived on them for a year, in '38,' said Mr. Levison approvingly. 'That was something like a drought. If we ever get one like it again it will cook half the stock in the country. We're that crowded up now that there's no get-away, as there was then, to the mountains.'

'Then you don't think this season is as bad as can be?' inquired Ernest. 'It seems very terrible to me.'

'It ain't as bad as that time unless you've lost half your cattle and don't see no way to save the rest,' affirmed his guest with mild decision, as if stating some rather agreeable proposition.

'Whatever shall we do?' groaned Ernest. 'I'm half ruined as it is.'

'You've spent a lot of money on this place, by the look of things as I came along,' said this mild but uncompromising critic, filling himself another cup of tea with much deliberation. 'You've been and put up a big paddock and a horse-yard and a grand house; and, last night, I'm blessed if I didn't ride slap into that drain arrangement, miles of it I see there was. Now, I don't say it's altogether a waste of money, but when a young man like you buys a place, he has no call to spend a

shilling that he can help till he gets it out of the run.'

'I can understand the prudence of that policy *now*,' answered Ernest, half amused, half inclined to resent this extremely plain speech from a comparative stranger, yet comprehending with instinctively clear perception the unaffected friendliness of intuition and truthful habit of his reviewer; 'but the fat cattle sold so well that I expected to continue paying my way and still improving the property.'

'That's where you made the mistake,' pursued the senior colonist; 'you went on thinking that the good seasons were a-going to last for ever. If you'd kept on selling and *never spending*, you'd have had your money in your pocket now, and might have been in the market for some of these lots of first-rate store cattle that's going a-begging—splendid fine-bred cattle, too, as you ever saw!' Here Mr. Levison emptied the teapot with a benign expression, and, crossing his legs reflectively, looked with mild reproach at his entertainer.

Ernest felt each item of guilty extravagance arise and arraign him separately, as Mr. Levison, with judicial enumeration, went on ticking off his pecuniary sins. In one of these lightning flashes of self-accusation with which conscience favours erring man, he realised the difference of his position from what it would have been if he had doggedly adhered to the scale of non-expenditure which he had found at Rainbar, and had retained the proceeds of his drafts of cattle with which to pay off his purchase-money, or re-invest in stores at the tempting tariff of the day. The faint counter-consolation that occurred to him, under the circumstances, was that if he had acted in such a way he would not have been Ernest

Neuchamp at all, but must have changed his very nature and identity. So there was no more to be said.

On the next morning Osmund was saddled for Mr. Levison, who, after saying that he would be back at sundown on the fifth day, departed for Mingadee. He was good enough to express his unqualified admiration of the gray horse's make and shape as he mounted him. 'I saw a lot of mares and foals knocking about at the big bend,' he said. 'Brood mares are useless wretches generally, and you can buy horses a deal cheaper than you raise 'em. But if you could turn out a few colts like this gray horse here, why, I should begin to think there was something in horse-breeding after all.'

On the fifth day punctually, about sundown, Mr. Levison reappeared at Rainbar. Having crossed the hundred miles of plain which separated the stations in two days, he remained one day, transacting the purchase of the store stock to which he had referred; then Osmund carried him back in two days, 'quite flippant,' as Jack Windsor observed. As he partook of the evening meal in company with Ernest, he essayed to cheer him up after the following fashion—

'I'd a sort of notion that I'd checked off all your money-burying before I left. But it seems I wasn't quite up to the number of holes a man can dig and fill up with sovereigns. I came across the Settlement!—regular town it is; and that native chap—active fellow he is, and no mistake—told me you'd paid the deposit money and given 'em employment, and advanced 'em money in other ways. I've seen new hands do many a blind trick, but I never knew a man before, of his own free will, bring down a lot of free selectors on his own run.'

'It does not appear to be a fashionable thing to do,'

admitted Ernest, 'judging from the remarks of my neighbours, as well as yourself; but I am somewhat like you in one respect—I do things upon my own responsibility, and, I am afraid, do not care sufficiently about other people's opinions. Sometimes I am wrong—very wrong—I admit. But at other times I am so satisfied of being right that the whole world would not turn me.'

Mr. Levison looked Ernest 'straight in the eye' with his own singularly clear, penetrating gaze. 'I hold with you in that,' he said at length; 'nothing like a man who acts on his own reason, and sticks to it. He may be right, or he may be wrong, but he'll come out better in the long run than any fellow that follows the wind wherever it blows. And so you believe in these cockatoo chaps? Now, what's the good of 'em?'

'Just so far,' said Ernest, 'that I hope, in time, to see a thriving and prosperous population here, making proper use of the soil, and advantageous to the proprietor, as they in turn would be benefited by him.'

Mr. Levison again regarded Ernest fixedly. His calm features, across whose lineaments the ripple of a positive opinion or sentiment rarely broke, might have been taken to denote the benevolent toleration of one who hears a spoiled child insist upon being presented with a portion of the moon, or propose, with saline agency, the capture of an uncaged bird.

'Population—what's the good of population on a cattle station?' he said, with his usual slow, unpunctuated direction of speech. 'All the crop they'll ever get out of that land you may put in your coat pocket. In a dry season it's as much as the salt-bush will grow, let alone grass or crops. In a wet one, all this country's like a garden, from the Paroo to the Macquarie. Your

horses don't want corn *then*, or hay—wouldn't eat it if they were paid for it. What are farmers to grow here that would pay for carriage to the coast? Wheat they can't think of in a hot place like this. Rice and such things they might have a try at, if they were Chinamen. But I can tell you what they *will* do.'

'What is that?' inquired Ernest, reassured.

'Why, you'll find that their cattle will go on increasing pretty fast; and what with grass rights and taking their blocks a little way off each other, they'll have nigh as much of Rainbar as you will in three or four years. I suppose that isn't what you fetched 'em up for?'

'I do not grudge them a fair share of the Crown land,' said Ernest. 'The land was made for all of us. But I certainly did not anticipate their requiring more than a limited area at any time.'

'Well, it will be *unlimited* if you don't manage to hem 'em in somehow. They'll give you your work to do, take my word for it, some of these fine days. My nags are a little fresher, and I am obliged to you for as good a mount as ever I crossed.'

'I am very happy to have been able to do you so small a service; and as for your advice, which you have been friend enough to favour me with,' said Ernest, feeling depressed and much lowered in spirit by his guest's extremely 'faithful' criticism, 'I can assure you that it has sunk deeply into my mind.'

'I'm glad of that,' said Mr. Levison gravely. 'There's very few men worth bothering with in the way of advice, and fewer still that aren't too great fools to take it when it's put before 'em. But I took a fancy to you, somehow, from the first time we met, when you had the thick boots and the swag. I thought that it showed pluck in you;

and, from what I see here, you're one of those that goes in for helping other people along the road of life. And a thundering soft thing it is, in a general way, I tell you. Why, you've been teaching that native chap to read, so he says.'

'I plead guilty to that,' said Ernest, with a smile. 'The fact is that Jack Windsor is such a smart fellow that is seems a pity he should be left helpless, as all ignorant men are. And there's plenty of spare time in the bush.'

'Is there?' said Mr. Levison. 'I never found it so. But that says nothing. I say it's a manly thing to feel for your neighbour because maybe he hasn't had a hundredth part of the chances you've had yourself. That's being kind and true-hearted, and being a gentleman, as I understand it,' concluded Mr. Levison, with rather unusual emphasis. 'But that's not what I want to say,' pursued he, buckling up the girths of his second saddle, and arranging his pack with the most accurate balance possible. 'It's this: you want some more store cattle on Rainbar.'

This last proposition Mr. Levison made in a tone of such peculiar conviction that Ernest could not frame a denial, but listened in wonder, merely ejaculating—

'In a dry season?'

'It ain't going to be dry for ever,' said Mr. Levison oracularly, 'and cattle are bound to rise within the next two years, as sure as my name's———Smith,' he added, with a faint relaxation of his facial muscles. 'I've just bought five thousand head of store cattle from the man I met at Mingadee; bought 'em cheap, for cash—my name's Cash, you know—and better bred cattle I never saw. I know 'em well. They're all on a run on the

Turon, and I'm to take delivery there. Seventeen-and-six for bullocks and twelve for cows. Can't hurt at that, eh?'

'I should say not,' said Mr. Neuchamp, calculating the scale of profits at three pounds ten shillings, which his bullocks had fetched, and, like all inexperienced owners, omitting to allow for either deaths, losses, or non-fattening tendencies. 'I wish I had half of them here—that is, when rain comes.'

'That's just what I was coming to,' said Mr. Levison, with still slower and more inexpressive enunciation if possible. 'If you'll be said by me, you'll buy the cows; they're about half and half. There's till next April to take delivery of 'em, and you can have 'em at what I bought 'em at—twelve shillings, big and little.'

'But the money?' said Ernest. 'I have only what will pay my expenses for six months.'

'I'll take your bill at twelve months, with interest added,' said the peripatetic philanthropist. 'You write to old Frankston and tell him so, and perhaps I'll renew if no rain comes. Tell him it's Levison's advice to you to make this bargain. He knows what that means. And my way of looking at things tells me that it's a deal more likely than not, that within five years, if you take these cows and breed up, the rain will come, cattle will rise, and you'll have nearer ten thousand head of cattle on Rainbar than five. I shall camp at that lake of yours to-night if I've luck. Good-bye, till we meet again. You buy those "circle dot" cows, and don't you waste your money.'

So departed Mr. Levison, rather incongruously inculcating economy and a heavy purchase of stock all in the same breath.

Ernest lost no time in writing to Paul Frankston to inform him of the offer of his very practical friend with reference to the store cattle, requesting his advice thereon. By return of post he received the following missive :—

MORAHMEE, 20*th January* 18—.

MY DEAR BOY—Have your letter, and glad to see you are regularly embarked in squatting life, and keep going at Rainbar in spite of bad times and bad weather. Seasons awfully uncertain in Australia ; always were ever since I was a boy, and I don't expect them to alter much. People make money here in spite of them, and so will you if you keep a good look-out. As to the store cattle, there's dirty weather ahead—the bank barometer falling and no rain. But for all that, Levison is a man to be backed. He is never far out. If he says cattle will rise, they will rise. I never knew him wrong yet. Where *he* has bought you can't go wrong in following his lead. He has taken a fancy to you, and wishes to put you on for a good thing. I never do things by halves myself. So I advise you to take his offer. Go or send for the cattle when he takes delivery, and trust to Providence to send rain and a market. When the bill falls due we must arange to pay or renew. Don't overdraw in other ways more than you can help, if you will let me give you my opinion. Crampton tells me your orders find their way down in spite of the dry weather. Spend *nothing*, never mind about its being necessary. That's the safe thing in squatting.

Shall we see you after you have brought your cattle home ? We have had awful hot weather. The mosquitoes seem livelier than average. Antonia thinks you might write and describe the country. She met Parklands the other day, who told her Brandon nearly finished all your careers with his four-in-hand freaks. Careful fellow, Parklands. Good-bye, my dear boy. God bless you.

PAUL FRANKSTON.

Thus fortified, Mr. Neuchamp wrote immediately to Mr. Levison, who had with characteristic carefulness left his addresses for the next month or two, and informed him that he accepted his offer with many thanks, and would attend, with Mr. Banks, at the station, some hundreds of miles off, where the cattle were running. This

matter settled, he told Charley of the adventure awaiting him, arranging to leave Jack Windsor in charge of the place until their return.

Mr. Banks expressed his unqualified approval of the whole matter. 'This sort of thing,' he was good enough to say, 'was something like. Putting on more stock was the proper sort of work; any money spent in that way would be sure to be returned. But hang these improvements! Filling up the station with a lot of weekly men, and once they're there, it's not so easy to send 'em away again. Levison's a chap that gets good value for his money, whatever he touches; and if he thinks buying store stock is the right thing, I'll put five to two on him and his tip. He will be there, or thereabouts, when the flag falls, I'll lay.'

Within reasonable time a letter arrived from Mr. Levison of a very concise and practical form. It set forth that, upon a certain day of a certain month, his droving manager would be at Leigh Court, in the district of King, where the herd of store cattle which he had purchased were running. That the proprietor was bound by his agreement to have five thousand head of cattle mustered and delivered within one month from the date specified. That his manager had instructions to deliver to Mr. Neuchamp, or his order, all the female cattle, young and old, of the said herd. He, Levison, had no doubt in his own mind that rain would fall within six months, and he wished him luck. This was the only portion of the letter not devoted to business. Laconic as was the style, Ernest felt touched by it, as the spontaneous expression of a heart filled with daily cares, and with rare leisure for friendship and sentiment.

After a certain amount of necessary consultation and

commissariat action, Mr. Neuchamp, one fine morning, left Rainbar with an imposing *cortège*. It consisted of Charley Banks, Piambook, and a man to drive the light waggon, which, containing food, raiment, cooking utensils, and bedding, Ernest very properly took with him. There were other two men, who had contracted to act as road hands and to make themselves generally useful. They drove half a dozen spare horses, Mr. Neuchamp being minded to purchase as few as possible at the seat of war, or the place of delivery. Fast travelling was, of course, not possible under the circumstances. They expected to travel at the rate of twenty or twenty-five miles a day, until they should arrive at Leigh Court, the run to be depopulated, so to speak. It was distant about six hundred miles. There yet remained about two months to the date of delivery. So Ernest gave himself seven weeks for the journey, and trusted to have a week or two for refitting before commencing his grand march homewards with two considerable droves of new store cattle.

Mr. Windsor and Boinmaroo were left in charge of the stock and station. Bitterly did the first-named gentleman deplore the hard necessity which prevented his going forth on the war-path with the other braves.

Every night after the first, on which occasion a neighbouring out-station was reached, and the impatient home-loving horses put securely into a yard, a camp was organised.

Two tents were pitched, one for the master and Charley Banks, the other for the men and any other road acquaintances that might be encountered. One of the new hands had an accordion. He played moderately, but quite well enough to satisfy the uncritical audience, and to enliven their somewhat unamused evenings.

## CHAPTER XXI

As the progress of Mr. Banks and his party would necessarily partake of the nature of caravan movements, Mr. Neuchamp decided, after a few days of co-operative wayfaring, to go ahead of his impediment. He would thus be spared the *ennui* of objectless camp life and needless expenditure of time. With regard to the value of this latter commodity, he began to lean to the opinion of Mr. Parklands, and to believe that time was ever in a colony, if not always a synonym for money, at least a matter of high consideration. Apart from this method of reasoning, his route after a while lay through a district which he had never before visited. And a portion of the locality promised to be interesting to the observer of men and manners for a novel reason.

He had since found that the owner of the large herd which Mr. Levison had purchased, as another buyer would have bought a team of bullocks or a flock of sheep, had been compelled to sell on account of the sudden influx of miners upon his run. Gold—the healer, the benefactor, the deliverer, the slayer, the betrayer, the enslaver of mankind in every age, in every clime—had been discovered in the vicinity of the long-silent peaceful valleys in which Abel Drifter's cattle had roamed for more

than a generation. Now all was changed: the green dales were invaded by noisy crowds, the waters were polluted, the air was thick with the smoke of camp-fires, maddening with the barking of dogs, the crashing of falling trees. Droves of hobbled horses attended by reckless boys, who galloped and wantoned over the sacred camp, filled the woods with alarm and distraction for the confused, terrified cattle and their despairing stockmen.

Believing if he hesitated that probably half his herd would wander off the run and the other half disappear by dying, Mr. Drifter put the whole herd into his agents' hands for sale, and, as we have named, found a prompt purchaser in Mr. Levison. It was this dread alternative of landmarks, this solemn, dismaying change of the pastoral stage into that of trade and agriculture, which Mr. Neuchamp had been curiously eager to behold.

Passing through that division of the great plain-ocean which varied in very slight degree from his own particular appointment, he entered upon a wholly different description of country, the characteristic peculiarities of which were clearly manifest to him. In the place of the torrid plains and rare watercourses which he had traversed for many days, he saw green park-like woodlands, pleasantly diversified by the long-absent hill and dale. Broad and fertile valleys adorned the landscape, from which many a harvest had been gathered since the first sod was turned. The houses of the proprietors were in some instances large and handsome, surrounded by shrubberies and orchards of ancient growth, or they bore the homely aspect of snug farmhouses, befitting the homes of sturdy, prosperous yeomen.

Fencing of a substantial and contradictory nature abounded, so that Ernest was more than once debarred

from cross-country travelling, and forced to adhere to the high road. He noticed that during the morning and evening hours the air was cool occasionally to keenness. The magnificent distances to which he had become accustomed between the homesteads had narrowed to something, if not identical with British habit, at any rate to far nearer propinquity than he had deemed possible in Australia. From all these signs and appearances Mr. Neuchamp decided that he had come upon a new and different phase of colonisation, and prepared himself to investigate and analyse accordingly.

'Here,' he said, 'is one of the cheering results of that human hive-swarming which we call emigration. How many of these comfortably-placed landholders, enjoying a charming climate, a fertile soil, and that abundance of elbow-room which every Anglo-Saxon needs, were peasant labourers, pinched and over-laboured, small farmers, or impoverished gentry, landless, tradeless, coinless younger sons in Europe? Here they have found their proper *métier*. Here they have repeated history and have peopled a new world, under the Southern Cross, where the passionate freedom of their forefathers may be handed down unblemished to the sons of the grandest of races.'

As he travelled this settled region the population necessarily commenced to show signs of alteration, both as to character and density. Instead of the sparse, sun-burned, nomadic units of the waste, the more various and pronounced types of agriculture and grazing industry presented themselves frequently and unmistakably.

Mr. Neuchamp hailed with pleasure the opportunity thus afforded of conversation and companionship. He saw the neat taxed-cart, with the farmers' wives and buxom daughters returning from the weekly market.

He saw the farmer himself mounted upon a stout, not over-refined hackney, jogging along the road with the bluff confidence inspired by good crops and good prices. He marked the great fields of maize alternating with hay and cereals, while the wide-fenced pastures, with the clover, lucerne, and the prairie-grass of America, were thickly filled with thriving cattle or the long-woolled sheep, with which his eye had been familiar in his native country.

'People in England fancy,' he thought, pursuing his ordinary train of thought, 'that life in Australia is principally devoted to lying under the shade of tropical forest-trees, and eating peaches or pineapples; or else that a course of violent and exciting border life is unremittingly hazarded. How little the average British mind is capable of comprehending the widely various conditions of colonial life, necessarily distinct and sharply defined, from the influences of varying soil, climate, and original settlement, with a hundred other underlying laws, by these centuries passed into the one concrete idea of "the colonist." As reasonable would it be to mingle the attributes of the Devon or Suffolk peasant—the Celtic Irishman, the Lowland Scot, the Cockney, and the Highlander, under the general name of Englishman.'

On the day when these truly original ideas had occurred to Mr. Neuchamp he was riding contentedly along the fenced highway with the intention of reaching at nightfall the homestead of a landed proprietor of some mark in his own district, whose acquaintance he had made at the New Holland Club. He was certain of hospitality and of receiving the clearest directions as to his route. Within a few miles of his destination, as he calculated, he encountered a gentleman, on a well-bred

back, who had just emerged from a lane at right angles with the road.

He replied to the stranger's courteous and unaffected greeting with an inquiry as to the precise distance of Mr. Haughton's house—if perchance he happened to be aware of it.

'I am going within a mile of the entrance gate,' said the stranger; 'I shall be happy to be your guide so far. I shall probably be at Elmshurst to lunch to-morrow, and should be there to-night—but that I have to visit a sick parishioner.'

Mr. Neuchamp had partly conjectured from the dress of the gentleman that he was in holy orders, and of course the point was settled by his admission.

'You are then the clergyman of this district?' said he. 'You are fortunate, I should say, in the locality of your labours.'

'Yes,' said the stranger, rather absently, 'there is no fault to be found with the climate or the scenery, and I have not met in my travels with a more pleasant and kindly society. There is but one defect, and that is universal.'

'And that is, may I ask?'

'Earnestness, thoroughness,' said the stranger, fixing his clear sad eye upon Mr. Neuchamp. 'If those whose duty it is to provide aid and comfort for the souls that are like Lazarus, lying at their gates, leprous and diseased in mind,—if they would but give of their substance, or better still, a hundred times better, of their time and energy,—much, how much, could be done for God and for man.'

'I passed a very neat church and schoolhouse just now,' affirmed Ernest; 'surely matters spiritual are

regarded here with interest, and if the enthusiasm you lament be wanting, when and in what land is it to be found?'

'I speak not,' said the unknown, a glow of fervour lighting up a pale handsome countenance, and illumining his melancholy dark eyes—'I speak not of the mere routine donations which reach respectable uniformity and stop there. I speak of the want of the spirit that maketh alive, and in one class not more than in others. The vicarious aid, it is true, is not sparingly or grudgingly given. But the heart's tribute—the life-donation—where is it?'

'I am sorry that it should be so,' said Ernest, thinking what a glorious pastor this zealous missionary would be for his community at Rainbar, when it was sufficiently grown and established. 'I am afraid none of us who are somewhat fully endowed with this world's goods do a tenth part as much as we might. But I do not see how matters are to be mended as the world whirls on its appointed course. Enthusiasm is dead, and belief will soon follow.'

'We might all do much—you will excuse my professional tone of exhortation,'—said this latter-day apostle, 'by performing our own distinctly laid down duties personally and rigidly, to arrest the dreary tendency you refer to—to plant the seeds of a richer and a more vigorous religious growth. I have not the pleasure of knowing your name; permit me to present my card. I trust that we shall meet again under circumstances more favourable for discussion and mutual acquaintance.'

'Thanks, I shall only be too happy. I am Mr. Neuchamp, of Rainbar, where I should be delighted to

see you if circumstances ever lead to your visiting so distant a locality.'

'I don't know where my Father's work may take me; but be assured that I shall be much gratified by any chance which involves future intercourse with one of kindred sentiments.'

Mr. Neuchamp gazed at the speaker, and thought he had rarely seen a more uncommon countenance. Still young, he was perhaps nearer to the goal of middle age than to the 'spring of springs' of early youth. The outline of the features was aristocratic and refined. His slight but symmetrical figure, in its careless ease of seat on horseback, suggested more extended practice in youth than was quite compatible with his present position. But the eye, mild, searching, calmly radiant, was the conspicuous feature. It showed the steady unfaltering regard of one ever willing to attest with his blood the truth of the doctrines which he held.

'We pass through these rails,' said he, 'and enter this lane, soon after which my path turns off and I leave you.'

As he pointed to the slip-rails Mr. Neuchamp spurred forward to prevent his having the trouble to take them down, and practised a manœuvre of which he was rather proud.

He stooped from his saddle, and, raising the top rail, placed it carefully upon the second. Then wheeling Osmund for a stride backward, that accomplished animal leaped easily over, without the slightest hesitation.

'Come along, sir,' said Ernest to the clergyman; 'it is no height, and I will put it up.'

'Thanks, no; you must really excuse me.'

Ernest reiterated his assurances that it was extremely low—no danger, and so on.

All unmoved by Mr. Neuchamp's requests and entreaties, the gentleman with the black coat and gray trousers quietly alighted, saying, 'You must excuse me, I do not leap at all.' He then took down the two lower rails and, replacing them, gravely remounted.

'Do you not think,' said Ernest, 'considering the large amount of cross-country work that a clergyman has to do in Australia, that every gentleman of your profession should practise leaping a little—I mean sufficiently to get over middle rails, and so on? you might be stopped by a low fence.'

'It may be so; there is force in your argument,' said the unknown, with a grave sad smile, 'but I do not care about leaping now, and there is then only one course open, that of taking down the rails. After all there are so many necessary gates, I find that I can generally get about my various duties.'

'Really,' persisted Ernest, 'I hope that you will not think me impertinent, but in a new country like this surely every one ought to train himself to encounter the exigencies of his position, and your seat is so firm that I am sure with a little practice you would soon be able to get over a moderate leap.'

Ernest thought he saw an approach to a smile flit over the thoughtful face of his clerical acquaintance.

'Who knows?' he said, holding out his hand; 'I trust we shall meet again. It may be that we shall be fellow-workers in this good land, where the harvest is plentiful, but the reapers, alas! few. Good-bye.'

Mr. Neuchamp pursued the path indicated, which led him to a substantial country-house, of which the well-kept approaches and trim, yet luxuriant shrubberies told of long and successful occupation. Here he was warmly

welcomed, and Osmund promptly delivered to a neat groom.

'Very glad to meet you in the country,' said his host, a frank, stout, gray-haired, but vigorous-looking man. 'What do you think of our district—anything like this on the Lower Darling? I hear you have settled yourself permanently there.'

'The two districts are about as similar as the West Riding of Yorkshire and the Pampas,' said Ernest. 'But Rainbar is a very good fattening country; that is all one can say in its favour just now.'

'Plenty of room, no diggers, no free selectors,' replied his host; 'well, I wish we could say as much here. I am too old to change now; but I think if I was your age again, I should be inclined to move out back; let the Grange, and come back to be comfortable here in my old age. But I think I heard the dinner-bell. Come along.'

Ernest heard it too, and was by no means sorry to comply with the summons. Dinner-bells, with the accompanying refections of civilised man, had been rather out of his line of late. He was introduced to the lady of the house, and her well-dressed, fresh-complexioned, cheerful-looking daughters, the very sight of whom raised the spirits of Mr. Neuchamp several degrees.

An active, keen-looking youngster of sixteen made up the family party.

Ernest Neuchamp was approved of by the ladies of the household, as indeed was generally the case, being one of those sympathetic and genial persons whom women instinctively take into favour. The conversation had become general and sprightly pleasant, when, in answer to a question about his travelling alone, he happened to

mention that he had met, he supposed, the clergyman, not far from their house.

'There is more than one clergyman in our district,' said the lady of the house, 'but I daresay we shall recognise him from your description.'

'He was a gentlemanlike person, rather handsome, indeed,' continued he. 'It seems an odd thing, though, that clergymen, as a rule, ride so indifferently, and especially in a new country like this, where the necessity of long journeys might have given them practice, one would think; yet I could not get your friend to follow me over a middle rail.'

'What?' said his host, with a look of altogether inexplicable astonishment mixed with amusement visible in his face; 'did you give him a lesson in riding?'

'I tried,' said Ernest; 'I am sure his horse would have followed mine if he had mustered up courage, and put him at it. I tried all I knew to induce him, and said that with a little practice I was sure he would soon be able to take moderate jumps.'

'Moderate jumps! oh, Lord!' said his entertainer; 'and what answer did he make?'

'He smiled gravely, and said, "Who knows?" then bade me good-bye. I hope he was not offended.'

'Ha! ha! ha!' yelled the youngster, exploding helplessly. 'Oh dear! oh! I'll lay anything, papa, it was Mr. Heatherstone. I shall die! I know I shall. What a jolly sell!'

The girls struggled with their emotions—one hid her face in her handkerchief. The lady of the house smiled, but tried to look grand, and reproved her son, who continued to shriek with suppressed laughter, and finally bolted out of the room, as the safer proceeding.

His host, making desperate efforts at self-control, said, at length, in a broken voice, 'My dear fellow! you mustn't mind these young people. I'm afraid they are laughing at a little mistake you must have made as to our clergyman's degree in equestrianism. But are we sure of our man—did you learn his name?'

'He gave me his card,' said Ernest, now shuddering under the consciousness of having, perhaps, again buried himself in a pitfall in this provoking happy hunting-ground, 'but I never looked at it. Here it is—"The Rev. Egbert Heatherstone."'

Here the second young lady broke down, while her mamma laughed decorously and under protest as it were; and paterfamilias, in an *almost* steady voice, thus spoke—

'You never heard of Heatherstone before, then? No? Well—the man you were trying to lure over a middle rail was formerly known, that is, before he entered the Church from strong convictions, as perhaps the boldest, the most reckless rider in Australia. He has ridden more steeplechases than you have hairs on your heads, I was going to say—but, to speak moderately, a larger number than most men living. Since he became a clergyman, a most sincere and hard-working one, he has given up sensational riding, and being passionately fond of horses, mortifies the flesh by abstaining from all that style of thing. You will excuse us all, I know, for being so rude; but really, you must admit the joke was irresistible.'

'I see—I admit—I confess,' said Ernest, with an air of deepest penitence. 'If I could only do penance for my sins of superficial judgment, it would be such a relief. Do you think the Rev. Egbert has a trifle of spare sackcloth?'

'You didn't notice his seat on horseback?' asked one of the young ladies innocently. 'Doesn't he look like a horseman? He can't hide *that*, or help his hands being so perfect—though I think he tries.'

'He rode a horse over a three-railed fence once, without saddle or bridle,' said the other sister, 'for a bet; before he was ordained.'

'He took Ingoldsby, the great steeplechaser, over a three-railed fence at twelve o'clock at night, and pitch dark too; there was a lantern on each post though,' chimed in the sixteen-year-old hero-worshipper of any reckless deed in saddle or harness.

'The maddest thing of all that I ever heard of him,' affirmed papa, in conclusion, 'was going across country one evening and taking sixteen wire fences running. He won his bets, but he had two hardish falls; one a collar-boner, into the bargain.'

'I really begin to think,' said Mr. Neuchamp despairingly, after every one had transacted a good downright unrestrained chuckle, 'that I shall never become fully acclimatised. This is the most peculiar and utterly unintelligible country ever discovered; or, am I devoid of understanding to an extent which disables me from ever rating individuals at their proper value?'

He was eventually consoled, and persuaded into singing second in a duet whereto the accompaniment was played with much taste and expression by one of the daughters of the house. He was perfectly at home in this department of criticism, and after receiving a few compliments upon his extremely correct performances, he commenced to forget the stupendous miscalculation into which he had been led with respect to the Reverend Egbert Heatherstone and his equitation. But it was not

forgotten by the inmates of the house and the inhabitants of the district, among whom it gradually spread. It always took rank among those glorious jests which, intelligible to every degree of capacity, float on with undiminished grandeur from generation to generation; and a stranger who reached that peaceful district, and was discovered by a delicate course of inquiry never to have heard that joke, was regarded with affectionate interest, and had it so carefully administered to him that not one drop of the *elixir jocosus* should be wasted in the process.

Leaving the honoured abode of hospitality and domestic happiness, with its fertile meadows and well-filled stack-yards, Mr. Neuchamp pursued his route quietly, intending to make his way to the property of another friend, whose place was at no great distance from the goldfield town near which was the station upon which his cattle were still depasturing. This stage was rather far for one day. He was considering whether he might expect to meet with a reasonable inn, and humming a souvenir of his last night's concert, when a horseman, coming at a brisk pace in the opposite direction, met him face to face.

In him he recognised a young squatter whom he had often encountered in Sydney in various festive scenes, and who had more than once pressed him to visit his station, if he should find himself in their district. Ernest knew the station of Baldacre Brothers by reputation to be large and rich. In fact the brand had a colonial fame. His curiosity was somewhat aroused to behold the establishment.

Mr. Hardy Baldacre expressed great concern that he should be just leaving home for a journey when his friend Mr. Neuchamp was coming into the district, and made

many excuses for not turning back—finally asking Ernest how far he thought of going that night. He mentioned the house of the brother of Colonel Branksome.

'Oh! that is too far,' said Mr. Baldacre; 'sixty miles, if it is a yard.'

'I don't think I will try to get quite so far,' said Ernest. 'Probably there is some inn which will do as a half-way house.'

'Oh! you'd better stay at our place,' said his friend with an expression of countenance not wholly intelligible to Ernest. 'It's about twenty-five miles from here, straight on the road; you can't miss it. You'll find my brother William at home. Good-bye!'

With this somewhat laconic invitation he put spurs to his horse and rode forward at a hand gallop, leaving Ernest undecided as to whether he should accept or decline an invitation not very graciously extended.

By the time, however, that he had got to the end of the rather long twenty-five miles over a worse road than he had hitherto travelled, he discovered that there was no other stage available without over-riding Osmund, so he commenced to look about for the homestead of the Messrs. Baldacre Brothers of Baredoun.

It was nearly dark when he came to a hut by the side of the road, situated in a small paddock, the upper rails of the fence of which were ornamented with sheep-skins to an extent which suggested that a new material for enclosures was being tested. Resolved to make inquiry as to this mysteriously invisible homestead, Mr. Neuchamp holloaed to the occupant of the hut in a loud and peremptory manner.

A man in his shirt-sleeves came to the door, not otherwise over-neat, and smoking a black pipe.

'Can you tell me where Baredown is?' demanded Ernest; 'it ought to be somewhere about here, I should think.'

'This is the place,' said the shirt-sleeved one coolly.

'And is *this* the home station of Baldacre Brothers?' inquired Ernest, vainly trying to disguise his astonishment.

'It's all that's of it,' said the smoker, with an attempt at jocularity. 'I'm William Baldacre; won't you come in and stay the night? It's rather late, and there is no place within fifteen miles.'

Ernest stared before him, around, and finally behind, before he answered the hospitable question. He made a mental calculation as to whether it was worth while to push Osmund on for fifteen miles over an unknown road in the dark. Finally, he decided to sacrifice his comfort for that night to the welfare of the gallant grey, and to accept the ultra-primitive hospitality of Mr. Baldacre.

'I met your brother, whom I had the pleasure of knowing,' he said, 'a few miles back. He was good enough to ask me to take up my quarters here to-night. I shall be very glad to stay with you.'

'All right,' said the elder man, a plain and unpolished personage when compared with his handsome, well-dressed younger brother, who swelled about the metropolis, by no means as if he had emerged from such a hovel. 'Give me your horse; he'll be safe in this paddock. Ours is rather a rough shop, but you must make allowances for the bush.'

Sadly and sorrowfully, after he had seen Osmund left free in the small moderately-grassed paddock, did Mr. Neuchamp follow his host into the hut. That building consisted of two small rooms. There was an earthen

floor, one or two stools, a small fixed table, far from clean. A bed at the side of the room offered a more comfortable seat than the stools, and upon this Ernest deposited his weary bones and disappointed entity, wondering doubtfully whether sleep would be uninterrupted or otherwise.

The usual meal of corned meat, damper, and milkless tea was brought in by the hutkeeper of the period, whose moleskins were strictly in keeping with the prevailing tone of the furniture and apartment. Much Ernest wondered at the precise mental condition which could suffer two free agents of legal age, the owners of a proverbially rich and extensive run, of a well-known highly-bred herd, free from debt and incumbrances, to live in a state of squalid savagery. He did not exactly put his questionings into this shape, but his manner had expressed a patent astonishment, which his host seemed to consider himself called upon to answer.

'We haven't done much in the building way here,' he remarked apologetically, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. 'I daresay we'll put up a cottage next year. But the old man never would spend a penny on the run here. He was snug enough at the old farm down the country, and somehow I've got used to the life, and it does me as well as any other. Hardy isn't often at home; he's half his time in Sydney. So he manages to hang it out here when he comes to help muster and so on. I reckon he thinks it saves money, and as he hasn't to live here *he* don't care.'

Ernest felt remorseful after this explanation, very simply delivered, at his feelings of disgust and disapproval. 'Suppose,' he asked himself, '*I* had been set down here, a raw schoolboy, transplanted from half-learned tasks to

the daily labour, the rude association, the unbroken loneliness of a distant station, debarred by a penurious old father from the smallest outlay not immediately connected with the herd, without books, change, society, or recreation, would it have been all-impossible that I should have grown into the mould in which my host is enclosed, or settled down into the resigned, sad-visaged man of five-and-thirty whom I see before me?' It *would* have been impossible in his case, he thought. Still he could enter sufficiently into the probabilities of the situation to comprehend the injustice to which the mental development of the elder brother had been exposed.

'Good heavens!' he thought to himself, 'what short-sighted idiots are parents who shut up their sons' lives in a moral dungeon like this! The abiding in the wilderness is nothing; nay, it has positively beneficial and ennobling tendencies. But this sordid imprisonment of the mind! No books, no companions, no ideas; for how can there be a circulation of ideas if reading, conversation, reflection be wanting?—the whole mind bent and fettered to the level of the branding pen and the cattle market—the smallest outlay affording a glimpse of the heaven of Art and Literature churlishly denied, lest a few broad pieces escape the all-gathering muck-rake. And when the game is played out, the long harvest-day over, and the crop garnered, what is the grand result for which a soul has been starved—a man's all-wondrous brain-marvel, miracle of miracles, enchantment before which all magic palls—stunted, and shrivelled from lack of nutriment and exercise, like a baby-farmed infant's body? A few hundreds or thousands, more or less; a sufficiency of clothes and food; a surety against poverty; and the possibly fully-developed son of the immortal, "a little

lower than the angels," remains hopeless, contracted, with the mind of an untaught child plus an experience of the more obvious forms of dissipation!'

The rude meal concluded, and the pannikins refilled, Ernest, as usual, felt sufficiently refreshed in spirit to examine his immediate materials. Mr. Baldacre smoked and talked unreservedly for a couple of hours; explained the presence of the sheepskins—they had been butchering for the diggers lately; described some of their pioneer life, including an adventure with a bushranger, the famous Captain Belville; and, finally, thought Ernest might like to 'turn in.'

Mr. Neuchamp looked distrustfully at the rude wooden frame, upon which sheepskins did duty for a mattress, and a pair of highly uninteresting blankets represented all other description of bedclothes. He protected himself against all nocturnal dangers by retaining the larger proportion of his habiliments, and desperately committed himself to the uncertainty. At earliest dawn he might have been seen leading Osmund towards the hut, after which he saddled up with unusual energy and care. He then betook himself to a grand deep water-hole at no great distance in the creek, where he swam and disported himself for half an hour at least, after which he indulged temperately in the pleasures of the table, as represented by a breakfast which was the facsimile of supper, and immediately thereafter bade his host good-bye, thanking him for his entertainment, and bidding farewell to the abode of Baldacre Brothers for ever.

Mr. Neuchamp smiled to himself when fairly on his way, thinking of the days of his inexperience, when he believed that all squatters, and indeed all colonists, lived in precisely the same fashion, and were charac-

terised by identically the same habitudes and modes of life.

He certainly had been 'had,' as Mr. Banks would have said, in the matter of trusting himself to the primitive establishment of the Baldacres, who were well known to every one in the district to live 'like blackfellows,' as the phrase ran. But neither he nor Osmund had suffered anything more than slight temporary inconvenience. Mr. Neuchamp was specially good at recovering, and in half an hour he was whistling and humming along the road as blithely as ever.

On this particular day he expected to reach, at an early hour, the abode of another club acquaintance, who had been unaffectedly hearty in impressing upon him the desirability of making his place his headquarters if he ever came to their district. At this house he expected to meet the Indian Officer who had so kindly taken care of his Arab steed for him and attended to his comforts on board the P. and O. This distinguished *militaire* had seen a good deal of service, but thirty-five years' exposure to the sun of Hindostan had not quenched his ardour for sport, spoiled his seat on horseback, or cooled his devotion to the fair sex. He had been commissioned by the Indian Government to make large purchases of horses in Australia for remount service, particularly for artillery and heavy cavalry. He was now on a tour of inspection through the chief breeding districts, to the end that the couple of thousand troop horses he was empowered to purchase and ship might do credit to his judgment. Combining, as he did, a frank yet polished address with the prestige of military rank, important services during the Mutiny, consummate knowledge of horseflesh, with a potentiality of unlimited purchase, Colonel Branksome

was at that time, perhaps, the most popular man in Australia.

It was on the right side of lunch-time when Mr. Neuchamp found himself opening a neat white gate, at the end of a well-kept drive, which further conducted him to the front door of a stately mansion, with easy circumstances and good taste written in every yard of the well-mown lawn, on every clump of the crowded shrubbery, on the long range of stabling at no inconvenient distance, even in the neat dress and respectful manner of the groom who came to take his horse almost as soon as he had dismounted.

The hall door opened in a spontaneously hospitable manner, and the host, accompanied by a middle-aged man very carefully attired in unmistakable mufti, left no doubt on any one's mind as to his pleasure in receiving him.

'Just in time for lunch, Neuchamp! Very glad you've found your way to our district. The Colonel, here, has just been thrashing me at billiards; let me introduce you: Colonel Branksome—Mr. Neuchamp.'

'Happy to meet you,' said the Colonel; 'find the morning hot? Deuced nice horse of yours; you haven't a few like him for sale, have you? I could take a hundred, and pay well too. But, of course, he's a favourite; all the good ones are hereabouts.'

'I am almost sorry to say that he is,' said Ernest, 'since I should have liked to have helped you to a few horses that would have done credit to Australia. I believe I have to thank you for an important service in procuring justice for my Arab on his voyage out.'

'A mere matter of course,' said the Colonel. 'I knew Granby who shipped him, and the old sheik who sold

him; personal friend, and all that: besides, I can't see a handsome horse or a pretty woman without taking the strongest interest in their welfare. Weakness of mine all my life. Too old to mend now, I'm afraid.'

'By George! I forgot the lunch,' said the host, looking at his watch. 'Come into my dressing-room, Neuchamp. Billy, you know your way.'

In a few minutes, after a temporary toilet, Ernest found himself in a large cool room, the furniture and arrangements of which betokened no hint of the considerable distance from the metropolis. Two pretty girls, whose complexions told of a cooler climate than that of the coast cities, and drew forth many a compliment from the susceptible warrior, embellished the well-appointed lunch-table. Here, with cool wine, delicate viands, and civilised society, Mr. Neuchamp was enabled utterly to discharge from his mind the unsavoury surroundings of his previous stage. Before they had finished the repast the eldest son of the house came in, apologising for his want of punctuality, but laying the blame upon a large body of miners whom he had been supplying with rations, and who had detained him until their wants were satisfied.

'Really!' said Mr. Branksome, 'the consumption of meat is becoming tremendous. Stock must rise directly. I feared that we were all going to be ruined at first. Now, I see plainly that it will be all the other way.'

'So, then, I suppose I must have made a good bargain in conjunction with Mr. Levison,' affirmed Ernest tentatively.

'Oh! you bought the "bar circle" cattle, then?' said young Branksome. 'They told me they expected a gentleman to take delivery directly. They are the best

bred cattle in this district. You were lucky to buy them.

'Poor Drifter,' said the old gentleman, 'it was anything but lucky for *him* that he was forced to sell them. I told him that he was hasty, but he was full of visions of their being killed and driven away right and left by the mining population, and would not hear reason.'

'The miners are very decent fellows, what I have seen of them,' said the son. 'Of course there will be all sorts among them; but he would have no greater risk of losing his cattle at their hands than with many others.'

'Not so bad as Sepoys, eh, Billy?' said the host; 'and yet I suppose you trusted the villains to the last minute.'

'Well, I did,' said the Colonel, 'and I'm not ashamed to say so; and so would you if you had seen them fight and die by your side for many a year as I had done. There were some splendid fellows among them—"true to their salt" to the last. It was a great chance that I wasn't shot down by my own men, like Howard and Weston, and many other commanding officers.'

'How did you escape, uncle?' said one of the young ladies, deeply interested.

'Well, I'd been out at daylight with a scratch pack of hounds hunting jackals. Just as I was coming in, the old havildar (I had saved his life once) came rushing out: "No go home, sahib," he said, "men all mad since chupatties come; shot Captain, sahib, Lieutenant, sahib, Major, sahib, and his men, sahib, hide away. Ride away, sahib." And he hung on to my horse's rein.

'"Let me go, you old fool," I said, "I must go back; the men will hear *me*. It's those rascally Brahmins."

'"You give life, sahib, you do no good," he cried out,

and, by Jove! the tears *did* roll down his face. "I give my life for the Colonel, sahib, if he please. All no use. Look there!" and he pointed to where a long line of flame was rising up from my bungalow and stable.

'"Where's Lady Jane?" I roared; "you don't mean to tell me they've taken her? I won't leave *her* if I die for it."

'"Lukehmeen syce, he very good man, he go away with Lady Jane this morning; go away to Raneepore. She all safe."

'"By Jove," I said, "that's good news. If Lady Jane was there now, I believe I should have gone in among the rascally Pandies with my sword and revolver, and seen it out."'

'How brave of you, Uncle William,' said one of the girls, her cheeks glowing and her lips trembling with excitement, as she gazed admiringly at the Colonel's hawk nose and bright blue eyes, which nearly matched his turquoise ring. 'And did the poor lady escape altogether?'

'Lady?' said the latter-day Paladin, in tones of astonishment. 'Lady Jane was a thoroughbred English mare that I'd just given three hundred for, worse luck, for I never did see her again, or any of my goods and chattels, from that day to this.'

'And what did you do then, uncle?' said the other sister, the humane sympathiser with Lady Jane being too much astonished and discomposed to continue the examination.

'I was on my old Arab, Roostoom, luckily,' said the Colonel, 'a horse known all over India. When I saw there was nothing for it, I turned his head straight across country for Delhi, and after missing a few shots, rode

one hundred and thirty miles before I stopped. Next morning I fell in with a troop of irregular horse of Jacob's, and stayed with them till we entered Delhi together at the Cashmere gate. I say, we have squared accounts with the Pandies; and I thought we were going to ride over to the diggings after lunch.'

Accordingly, about three o'clock, behold the whole party, including the two young ladies and Mr. Neuchamp, mounted and cantering along the extremely well-marked road which led to the mining township of Turonia. The young ladies rode with grace and spirit upon well-groomed, well-bred horses, drawing forth many encomiums from the horse-loving and gallant Colonel, who said that their steeds would fetch a thousand rupees in Calcutta, and the young ladies receive half a dozen proposals of marriage the very first day they appeared on the Maidan.

The young ladies, in return, declared that there was only one man in the district to be compared to their uncle; and as he sat with easy military seat upon a strikingly handsome thoroughbred bay, with a star, the whole affair, from the well-brushed hat to lower spur-leather, 'exquisite as a piece of lace,' he justified their appreciation. As they neared the widely-extended collection of huts, shafts, heaps of mullock, and imposing structures of weatherboard and iron, thronged with a stalwart army, ten thousand strong, of bronzed and bearded gold-miners, they were joined by a semi-military-looking personage, dressed in uniform not all devoid of gold lace, and followed by a highly efficient-looking, well-mounted trooper.

'Ha! Stanley,' said Mr. Branksome, 'well met; how do you do? This is my friend, Mr. Frank Stanley, the Commissioner of the goldfield. Allow me to introduce you

to him. Are your subjects peaceable enough to venture among; and how does the escort get on?'

'I will answer for my diggers,' said Mr. Stanley, bowing to the young ladies, 'being the most genuinely polite people in the world, especially to ladies; and the escort was a little over ten thousand ounces last week.'

'You don't say so?' said Mr. Branksome; 'three thousand ounces more than last week. Why, how much do you intend to get at by the end of the year?'

'Several rich leads have been discovered lately,' said the Commissioner, with a slight air of importance. 'If they find a deeper deposit below the basalt, as many of the experienced miners think likely, we shall eclipse California.'

'How very interesting,' said Mr. Neuchamp, much excited by proximity to a novel and recent development of colonial industry; 'I suppose you find great difficulty in managing such an immense and disorderly concourse.'

'If they were disorderly we simply could not manage them,' said the representative of the Queen's Government. 'We have about an average of one constable to a thousand men. Moral force, applied with discretion and firmness, suffices for all purposes of rule and coercion. Besides, the miners, as a rule, are well-educated men, and such populations are always manageable.'

'Why so?' inquired Ernest. 'I should have thought that they were easily led away by designing persons.'

'The contrary is the case,' said the experienced proconsul. 'Without stating that there are always among the miners gentlemen and graduates of the university, a considerable proportion consists of well-educated, travelled, sagacious men. These leaven the mass; and having

strong convictions themselves upon all subjects, they are amenable to argument—to logic—which comprehends justice. It is an ignorant population which follows the demagogue like sheep; it is the uncultivated mind which is at the mercy of every specious lie which is offered to it.'

'Then crime is rare,' said Ernest, 'and offences against life and property uncommon?'

'Taking the numbers, one may aver, with safety, that crime is exceedingly infrequent. At the same time I cannot deny that the police charges are tolerably numerous. But in case of serious offences we have the main body of miners on the side of law and order, and the criminal rarely eludes the arm of the law.'

By this time they had neared the outskirts of the town, and Ernest was much pleased with the many neat cottages, surrounded by trim gardens, which they passed. Among these stood an exceedingly small but faultlessly neat dwelling, surrounded by a garden filled with vegetables, the profuse growth of which was due to a small stream of water which had been ingeniously led from the neighbouring hills. The owner, whose attire, though suitable for working, was marked by the exceptional neatness which pervaded the establishment, leaned upon his spade and gazed calmly upon the *cortège* as it passed along the winding forest track.

'How pleasant a sight it is,' said Ernest, 'to see one man, at least, superior to the mad thirst for gold which is common to this eager population. How contentedly that gardener devotes himself to the occupation in which he has probably passed his former life, and which, without holding out any splendid prize, no doubt provides him with a certain and ample subsistence.'

'I should say,' said Mr. Branksome, 'that your recluse has probably lost his all at a gold venture, and is from circumstances compelled to rusticate, literally, until he makes a fresh start.'

The Goldfields Commissioner smiled, but made no remark, as he rode close up to the palings of the garden and reined in his horse.

The gardener left his work and advanced to the fence, apparently to hold converse with the important official—a man at that time possessed of enormous power and irresponsible control.

'Hallo, De Bracy!' said the latter, 'how are you getting on? Weather too hot for the green peas? Asparagus pretty forward?'

'Shocking weather, altogether,' said the horticulturist, advancing to the barrier and shaking hands with the Commissioner. 'If it were not for my irrigation I should be ruined and undone. Splendid thing, water!'

The Colonel and Ernest, with the young ladies, had by this time ridden close up, and were regarding the somewhat exceptional 'grower,' whose sunburnt hands exhibited much delicacy of shape and careful treatment, while his extremely handsome face and figure told unmistakably of long acquaintance with the *haute volée* of the world's best society.

'Are you going to the bachelors' ball to-morrow night?' asked the Commissioner. 'Great muster, and no end of young ladies.'

'Well, I may look in for an hour if I can get these cauliflowers properly earthed up in time,' said this anomalous member at once of the gay and workaday world. 'You know the season is so forward that I dare not give them another hour.'

'Great God!' said the Colonel, 'why, it's De Bracy! Why, Brian, old boy, what, in the name of all that is impossible, brings you here?'

Ernest turned at the exclamation, and saw that the Colonel's bold features had changed, and were working like those of a man who sees some visitant from the silent land—is confronted by an unreal presence that stirs his inmost soul and curdles the very life blood.

The young ladies stand, pale with surprise.

'Oh, it's you, Billy Branks,' said the provider of esculents. 'Come down from India? Nearly as hot here, eh? Well, I lost all my money in mining enterprises; the finest substitute for unlimited loo I ever fell across. And having absolutely nothing, and being far from the land of friends, bill discounters, and outfitters, why, I took to gardening. *Il faut cirre*, you know; and I was always fond of dabbling in amateur handicrafts.'

'Splendid life, beautiful weather, not too cold; shouldn't mind it a bit; make heaps of money, I'm sure!' said the Colonel incoherently. 'But oh! Brian, old fellow, I never thought I should see you *working* for your living.'

'Why not, my dear boy?' said the philosopher of the spade coolly. 'What does the old Roman poet say —*furcae amor honestus est et liber*—stick to your knife and fork, and all that. Horace has no doubt on the subject. This is my Sabine farm, and there is the Fons Bandusiae, for a time—glad to say—at any rate, for a time—the pre-remittance stage. It's safer than billiards, and more creditable than whist—as a livelihood.'

'True, by Jove!' said the Colonel, 'most honourable and all that. But the fellows at the Rag would never believe it, if I go back and tell them that I saw Brian

de Bracy growing vegetables and living by it, by gad.'

'Tell 'em every word of it, Billy, old boy,' said the wholly unabashed and true descendant of Adam, squaring his shoulders and displaying his symmetrical figure. 'Tell some of them to come out and try their luck here. It will do them a lot of good, make men of them, and keep them away from the bones.'

'Certainly, certainly,' assented the Colonel, hopelessly confused. 'Most likely they'll all come. Charming climate, splendid salad, and so on. Well, good-bye, old man. Sorry to see you looking so well. Oh lord! why didn't the French Count kill you instead of your winging *him*, in that row about Ferraris, and stop this. Good gad!'

So saying, the warm-hearted warrior wrenched away his horse's head and departed along the homeward track, inconsolable for at least a quarter of an hour, at the expiration of which time he unburdened his soul to the nearest niece as follows:—

'Awful thing! poor Brian, wasn't it? By gad, when I first recognised him, thought I should have fallen off my horse. Last time I saw him he was coming out of the Travellers', in London, with a duke on one arm and the commander-in-chief on the other. Awful fuss always made about him. No swell within miles of him—at Ascot, Goodwood, and so on. Women reg'lar fought about him—handsomest man of his day. Shoot, ride, fence, everything, better than the best of the amateurs. And now, what's he down to? By gad! it makes a baby of me.' And the honest, kindly veteran looked as if a cambric handkerchief would have afforded him great comfort and relief under the circumstances.

'Never mind, uncle,' said the sympathising maiden, 'you'll see him at the ball to-morrow night, and I'll dance with him—not that there's much charity in that. You know how nicely he looks at night. There won't be a man there to be compared with him.'

'Of course I'll go,' said the Colonel, recovering himself as became a soldier, 'and you may look me out a nice girl or two for a waltz. I don't *think* I ever went to a ball at a diggings before.'

## CHAPTER XXII

A PLEASANT ride home in the cool of the evening, comprising some æsthetic talk on the part of Ernest with the youngest daughter, and a sensational bit of horsemanship by the Colonel, who rode his horse over a stiff three-railer that Miss Branksome had denounced as dangerous, prepared the party for a very merry dinner, after which some dressing set in, and the whole party started for the ball in a high mail phaeton.

The mining township of Turonia, while tolerably open to criticism by day as to its architecture, with the kindly aid of shadow and moonbeam looked sufficiently imposing by night, with its long line of lighted street, its clanking engines and red-gleaming shift-fires.

The particular night chosen for the entertainment which the bachelors temporarily dwelling in and around the golden city of Turonia had provided, was of the clearest moonlight procurable. Undimmed, awful, golden, pure, in the wondrous dark-blue dome, glowed the thrones of the greater and the lesser kings of the night. The trees upon the swart hillsides were visible in fullest delicate tracery of leaf and branch, as at midday. Each trail in the red dusty roadpaths showed with magic pencilling of outline. The dark-mouthed cruel shafts, which

lay as if watching for a prey on either side of the narrow roadway, were plainly visible to the most careless wayfarer. So it chanced that from cottage and villa, from farmhouse and home station, and even from less pretentious habitations than any of these, wended at the usual hour a concourse of joyous or pleasure-enduring visitants, not specially distinguishable in air, manner, or raiment from metropolitan devotees of similar tenets.

Pretty Mrs. Merryfield was there, whose husband, formerly in the navy, held as many shares in the Haul and Belay Reef as would at that time have enabled him to retire upon club life and whist for the rest of his days. Managing Mrs. Campion, with her three daughters (Janie Campion was not unlikely to be voted the belle of the evening), sailed in, imposing with bouquets all the way from Sydney, the fern sprigs, camellias, and moss rosebuds of which were marvels of freshness. Little Campion and his partner, George Bowler, were driving a roaring trade as auctioneers, and a cheque for fifty for the girls' dresses and fal-lals was, he was pleased to say, 'neither here nor there.' The doctors, half a dozen, were chiefly married men, and contributed their full share to the feminine contingent. So did the four lawyers. Mining cases are perhaps the most interminable, complicated, and technical known in the records of litigation. The bankers were in great force and profusion. In mining towns they are necessarily numerous and competitive, and there are few departments of social accomplishments to which they may not lay claim. Thus many were the celebrities contributed by them that night—athletic champions, musical bankers, and bankers that danced, bankers that billiarded and whisted, bankers that 'went in for beauty' and preserved their com-

plexions, and bankers that combined divers of these claims to consideration. In a general way it may be assumed that the *jeunesse dorée* of that inevitable profession numbers as many 'good all-round men' as could be taken at hazard from either of the services, military or naval—the metropolitan young-lady vote notwithstanding. Our ball yet had some distinctive features. Many of the irreproachably attired persons, there and then present, had spent the day in avocations which do not in a general way precede ball going. Jack Hardston had worked his own eight hours' 'shift' that day, from 8 A.M. to 4 o'clock in the afternoon, in a 'drive' of considerable lateral penetration, at a distance of 160 feet from 'upper air.' After a light repast, a smoke, a swim in the Turonia, and a somewhat protracted and hazardous toilet, he asserted himself to be wound up exactly to concert pitch. Twice as fit indeed as when he carried the money of the men for the grand military pedestrian handicap. Mild little Mrs. Wynne had treated herself to the ball on the strength of Lloyd Watkyn having come 'on the gutter' in his claim at Jumper's Gully in the early part of the week. So she finished up her baking and brewing, let us say, and having handed over the three-year-old Watkyn Williams, with many injunctions, to her neighbour Mrs. David Jones (also of the Principality), proceeded with her husband, 'dressed for once like old times,' as she said with a little sigh, to the hall of the great enchanter—even music—who hath power over body and soul, life and limb; who with a chord can call forth the tears of the past, the joys of the present. And very nice they looked.

Horace Sherrington was there—suave, correct, rather worn-looking, but incontestably 'good form.' He made

a handsomer income by the exercise of his talents than those somewhat varied natural gifts had ever previously afforded him. Every evening he came to the camp mess, where the Government officials kept something like open house for all pleasant fellows who were 'of ours' in the former or the latter time. No one sang so good a song as Sherrington, was so racy a *raconteur*, played a better hand at whist, had a surer cue at pool. But no one knew precisely how he spent his day, not that any one cared much. There were too many men of mark who had tried every employment on that goldfield for luck and honest bread, including the officials themselves, for them to affect any snobbish discrimination of avocations. But Horace did not volunteer the nature of his daily duties; he was not a miner, a speculator, a reefer, nor an engine-driver, a clerk, or puddler. His reticence piqued them. One day the police inspector's horse shied at a man in a loose blue shirt and very clay-stained general rig, having also an immense sheaf of posters in his hand. 'What the devil do you mean, my man, by flourishing these things in my horse's face?' growled the somewhat shaken autocrat. 'Beg your pardon, sir,' quoth the agent of intelligence, himself passing on. But it was too late. The lynx-eye settled upon him with unerring aim, like a backwoodsman's rifle. Both men burst out laughing. The elegant and accomplished Horace was a bill-sticker! The festive concourse partook, in one respect at least, of classical and traditionary fitness. The sincere and fervid worshippers of Terpsichore held sacred revel in a temple—the Temple of Justice! For the large handsomely decorated hall, which resounded with the inspiriting clangour of a very passable brass band, was in good earnest the court-house

of Turonia. By the simple process of removing the dock and draping the witness-box as a lamp stand, placing the musicians upon the magisterial bench, with, I hardly need to mention, a profuse exhibition of international bunting, a fairly ornamental and highly effective ball-room was secured.

It was generally believed, and indeed asserted by the *Turonia Sentinel*, that the Commissioner, who was known to be *beau calseur*, had bribed the contractor, when completing that magnificent edifice, to bestow extra finish upon the flooring, with ulterior views as to its utilisation for society purposes. Be that as it may—and much gossip was current about that high and mighty official of which he took no heed—there *was* some truth in a subsequent legend that a prisoner and the constable by whom he was being escorted to the dock on the following morning slipped and fell as heavily and unexpectedly upon the glassy floor as if they had been essaying the gliding graces of the rink for the first time.

When the Branksome Hall party drove up, the entertainment had commenced, and the two first dances having been got through, the *gêne* of all beginnings and early arrivals was evaded. The ladies having been first conducted for envelope-removing purposes into the jury-room, and the men's overcoats and wideawakes deposited in the land office, the stewards with elaborate courtesy escorted them to the hall of dazzling delight.

The Commissioner, in blue and gold (at that period of Australian history these officials wore uniforms), looked most military and distinguished, his heavy drab moustache and decided cast of countenance suiting the costume extremely well. The second steward was a broad-shouldered, blonde, blue-eyed personage, whose

singular talent for organisation caused his services to be in great request at all public demonstrations—social, military, legal, or ecclesiastical. He looked like a squatter or a naval man, but was in reality a bank manager. The third steward was a tall handsome man, very carefully attired, whose delicate features were partly concealed by an immense fair beard. His manner, his mien, his every look and gesture, told as plainly as words to any observer of his kind of foreign travel, of 'the service' in early life of that occasional entire dependence upon personal resources which has been roughly translated as 'living by his wits.' On his brow was the imprint writ large, in spite of the faultless toilet, finished courtesy, the perfect *aplomb*, the half-unconscious *fierté* of his manner, the somewhat doubtful *affiche* of adventurer.

Attended by these magnates, for whom way was made with ready respect, the Hall party sailed into the well-lighted, well-filled room with considerable prestige.

Ernest was considerably astonished at the general appearance of matters, while the Colonel openly expressed his admiration and satisfaction.

'Gad, sir!' he said to the Commissioner, 'I had no idea that you were able to get up your dances in this fashion. What a field of neat well-bred-looking flyers—I mean deuced pretty girls, and monstrously well dressed too. Puts me in mind of one of our Hurryghur dances. We used to have such jolly spurts at the old station before that cursed Mutiny spoiled everything.'

Mr. Neuchamp thought it was not so very much less imposing in appearance than a ball in Sydney; room not so big; perhaps a trifling flavour of the provinces.

But the Bombay galop having struck up, the Colonel

possessed himself of a partner of prepossessing appearance, through the good offices of the Commissioner, and sailed off at a great pace. Ernest lost no time in appropriating the eldest Miss Branksome, and reflection was merged in sensation.

'I suppose you hardly expected to have any ball-going in this particular spot,' said he to his partner, 'a few years ago.'

'We should just as soon have expected to go to the opera and hear Tietjens,' said Miss Branksome. 'I have often ridden over this very spot with papa, and seen the wild horses feeding on the hill where the town now stands.'

'And you like the change?'

'I can't say that we did at first. We fancied, I suppose, that the great invading army of diggers would eat us up, and we resented their intrusion. But they turned out very amiable wild beasts, and one advantage we certainly did not calculate upon.'

'What is that, may I ask?'

'The number of nice people that would accompany the army. Our society is ten times as large and pleasant as in old times. We are hardly a night without quite a small party of visitors. You see there are the commissioners, magistrates, bankers, and other officials, all gentlemen and mostly pleasant. Besides, the gold attracts visitors, like yourself, for instance.'

After a very satisfactory fast and unaffectedly performed galop, the susceptible Colonel joined them at the refreshment table, accompanied by a young lady with a wild-rose complexion and great dark eyes, who had been evidently dancing at a pace which had caused that mysterious portion of her *chevelure* known (I am informed)

as 'back hair' to fall in glossy abundance over her fair shoulders.

'Splendid floor, Bessy,' he said to his niece. 'Capital music—partner beyond all praise!' (Here the young lady looked up with smiling reproach.) 'Fact! haven't had such a dance since the last ball at Calcutta. There were two duels next day—about a young lady, of course' (here the small damsel looked much concerned)—'and poor O'Grady, who had heart complaint, but couldn't control his feelings at a ball, died within the week.'

'Oh, how dreadful!' said the little maiden, with a sincere accent of distress. 'But nobody dies after a ball here, or fights duels either, that I ever heard of. Why should they in India, Colonel Branksome?'

'Can't say,' said the Colonel. 'Let me give you a little champagne; heat of the climate, I suppose; too many soldiers, too few ladies.'

'India must be a beautiful place, Colonel Branksome,' observed the grave little damsel, looking out of her big eyes with an air of deliberate conviction.

'Glorious, splendid; that is, most infernal hole—hot, dull, miserable—full of niggers. Hope I may never stay another year in it. Get my pension, I hope, when I get back and settle up with the remount agent. After that, if they ever catch Billy Branksome out of England again, they may make a Punkah-wallah of him.'

'Good gracious, Colonel Branksome!' said the matter-of-fact danseuse, who now looked as cool as if she had been walking a minuet. 'I thought all soldiers were fond of India. Oh! there's that dear old Captain de Bracy.'

'Gad! so it is,' said the Colonel. 'Look at him, Bessy, strolling in, and bowing to every woman he knows,

as if he was at a ball at the Tuileries. Gad! I *did* see him there last. And what do you think he was doing? —why, dancing in a set with two crowned heads and four princesses of the blood. He and Charles Standish made up the set; by gad!'

'Oh, doesn't he look like a nobleman?' said the *débutante* enthusiastically, opening her innocent eyes and feasting on De Bracy's middle-aged charms. 'And oh, what lovely, wonderful studs!'

'So you're here, Master Billy, as usual?' said the object of this highly favourable criticism. 'Couldn't keep away from a ball if your life depended upon it. Old enough to know better, ain't he, Miss Maybell? Happy to see you all here to-night. Not afraid of the stumps and holes? I'm well enough, thanks, Miss Maybell: heard *you* were coming, and though I seldom go out now—I am here.'

'Oh, Captain de Bracy!' said little Miss Maybell, perfectly overwhelmed with the compliment to her unworthy small self (as she erroneously held, underrating her fresh and innocent beauty), and mentally comparing De Bracy's appearance with that of a print of the Chevalier Bayard which was among her treasures at home.

A great tidal wave of promenading couples overwhelmed and dispersed the *partie carrée* for a while, so that they were compelled to make arrangements for the next dance, which happened to be a *deux-temps* waltz. Having relinquished Miss Branksome to De Bracy, and seen pretty little Miss Maybell carried off by young Tom Branksome, who recommended his uncle to try Mrs. Campion, as being a fine woman and of a suitable age, Ernest found, rather to his surprise, that he was a little

late, as every possible partner for a fast dance had been secured. The fact was, that the proportion of the sexes was in the inverse ratio to what generally obtains at balls in a more settled state of society. Therefore, more than average alacrity and foresight was necessary to ensure a regular succession of partners.

As Mr. Neuchamp, smiling to himself at his involuntary state of injured feelings, sauntered towards the refreshment room, he met the steward, who had been introduced to him by the Commissioner as Mr. Lionel Greffham.

'You don't seem to be dancing,' he said; 'well, it is rather a bore, after the first turn or two. Bright and I are having a glass of champagne; will you join us?—it is "number two."'

There was such an evident desire to be civil on Mr. Greffham's part that Ernest, who had not at first regarded him with perfect approval, felt moved to respond to so friendly an accost. He found Mr. Bright in the supper room, in conversation with a well-dressed, quiet, but not the less striking-looking personage, who was introduced as the district inspector of police, Mr. Merlin.

'What do you think of society on the diggings?' said Mr. Bright to Ernest; 'hardly what you would have expected?'

'It is utterly wonderful,' said Ernest. 'I am perfectly amazed at the order and decorum which everywhere prevail, and even at the elegant and enjoyable party to-night—so many nice people you seem to have.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Merlin, 'nothing is more wonderful, as you say. There *are* so many extremely nice people here. So well worth knowing. People who have such noble, disinterested views, eh, Greffham?'

'I quite agree with you,' answered that gentleman. 'But it's rather a bore we can't have a little whist, isn't it? A quiet rubber, or a game at billiards, would be much more sensible than all this capering with a lot of people that, in any other part of the world, you wouldn't dream of speaking to.'

'Surely not,' said Ernest; 'some of our friends here are of unimpeachable *ton*, and for the rest they appear to be of very fair average standing. I am very much pleased with the whole affair.'

'Greffham is fastidious, and plays the Sybarite among his other characters,' said the inspector slowly and distinctly. 'He suffers much here when the rose leaves are unavoidably crumpled. So much depends upon a man's antecedents.'

'I don't know that I am more fastidious than others,' he said, smiling, though the eye, that infallible referee in facial expression, did not agree with his amused expression. 'You know that *you*, Master Merlin, rather agree with me than otherwise. But seriously, suppose we go over to the Occidental and have a game of billiards. Oceans of time; these misguided Turonians will dance for hours yet.'

The proposition met with general approval, and Mr. Neuchamp assented, not that he cared about billiards, at which he was only a middling performer, but he felt the inexplicable influence of the strange scene and novel surroundings, and was more inclined than ordinarily *desipere in loco*.

'The four acquaintances crossed the street, which was filled, as far as they could see, with a surging crowd of men, chiefly attired in the ordinary dress of miners. Shops brilliantly lighted, and of imposing appearance as to their

fronts, lined the long, narrow, and not altogether straight street. Mr. Neuchamp thought he had never seen such an assemblage of intelligent-looking men. Evidently the flower of the working classes, while from all the trades and professions a large proportion had been lured to Turonia by the golden possibilities of the great rush. What amazed Ernest chiefly was the astonishing order and polite behaviour of this vast concourse of people, containing presumably the ruffianism of all lands under the sun. He had seen mobs in the British towns and cities and in other parts of the world. In all these gatherings he had occasionally encountered rough usage, had heard much foul language, and had suffered risk or loss of personal belongings.

But in this strange crowd no conduct other than of mutual respect and courtesy was observable. Rarely a word to which objection could be taken fell on the ear. The press parted and permitted the four gentlemen to walk through as independently as though they were the Dowager Patroness at a charitable institution. The brilliantly-lighted bars at the numerous hotels were certainly full, but there seemed to be more talking than consumption of liquor, and the spectacle of drunken men was altogether absent. A few police constables, unobtrusively placed, denoted that the Imperial Government, so calm, so impartial, yet so long of arm and sure of grasp, was represented. Otherwise it looked very much as if the great heterogeneous mass of humanity, now turning up the precious metal at Turonia at the rate of a couple of tons of gold per quarter, was permitted to manage itself. This was by no means the case, as Mr. Merlin could have explained. An unsparing crusade was organised against all manner of open vice and crime.

No quarter was given or respite permitted. Passing through the bar, among the occupants of which Ernest did not observe any one to carry a revolver, or to make as though the good-humoured landlord was likely to be, without notice, 'one of the deadest men that ever lived,' they reached a large, well-lighted room, where two handsome new billiard tables were in full swing. As they sat down on the cushioned benches which lined the room, a young fellow in a blue shirt and clay-stained trousers made a break of twenty-seven, and thereby won the game in a style which showed that he had not devoted all his life to mining industry. The marker promptly signalled to Mr. Greffham. He and Ernest then took possession of the vacated table.

There is no doubt that at certain times an electrical tone pervades not only the physical but the moral atmosphere, affecting to depression or exaltation the mind of man, that subtle reflex of the most delicate external influence. Such a night was this. The music of the band was pealing from the opposite side of the street—the vast, surging, excited, but self-contained crowd presented the strangest contrasts of society, as akin to the rudest types of life in certain aspects, so near to Utopian models in advanced manners and intelligent consent. Even the scraps of conversation which found their way to Ernest's ear were of a novel and fairy-legendary nature.

'Made eight hundred pounds in ten days out of that bit of "surface." Jem did; I sold a share in Green Gully, No. 5, for three drinks last week, and now they've struck gold and want a thousand for it. Commissioner settled that dispute to-day at Eaglehawk.'

'Who got number seven block?'

'Well, Red Bill, and his crowd; it's on good gold too.

'What did Big George say?'

'Oh, he was pretty wild, but he couldn't do nothing, of course.'

'I'll take three hundred and half out of the ground for a share in number two,' and so on, and so on.

Mr. Neuchamp had come on to the long-disputed territory, 'Tom Tidler's ground,' and the 'demnition gold' (if not silver) was sticking out of the soil everywhere. Ten-pound notes were handed across the bar for change as readily as half-crowns. Nuggets worth from £50 to £100 were passed about in the crowd for inspection with the most undoubting good faith and confidence in the collective honesty of mining mankind.

Under these conditions, it was a night for bold and reckless conception, a night when the ordinary prudences and severities of conscience might be calmly placed behind the perceptions, and the 'fore-soul' be permitted to leap forth and disport in the glorious freedom of the instincts and original faculties.

No sooner had Ernest handled his cue and struck the first ball than he perceived that he was in one of his rarely happy veins, when, sure of his play, he was also likely to fall in for an unusual allowance of 'flukes.' Therefore, when Greffham, who had kindly allowed him ten points, proposed to have a pound on the game, just for the fun of the thing, he promptly acceded.

He won the first with ease, Mr. Greffham playing a steady but by no means brilliant game. And, much to his astonishment, the second also, with a couple of pounds which he had staked, with the good-natured intention of giving back Mr. Greffham his money. Ernest did not win the second game quite so easily, but his luck adhered to him, and a shower of flukes at the latter end landed

him the winner. His antagonist bore his defeat with the finest breeding and perfect composure, deciding that it was quite a pleasure to meet with a gentleman in this howling desert, socially, who *could* play, and trusting that they might have another game or two before Ernest left the district. Then Mr. Bright and the inspector had a short but brilliant game, chiefly remarkable for the sparkling, if somewhat acidulated, repartee which it called forth. Then it was voted proper to return to the ball-room. Here matters had apparently reached the after-supper stage. The dancing was more determined, the floor smooth to the last degree of perfection. De Bracy, the Commissioner, the Colonel, and the Branksome Hall party were still untired, unsatiated—the cheeks of the young ladies showed paler in the growing dawn-light, their eyes larger and more bright, and the hair of little Miss Maybell positively 'would not keep up, and there was no use trying to make it.' Ernest was just sufficiently fortunate to capture Miss Janie Campion for the gallop, which proved to be the concluding one as far as he was concerned. For old Mr. Branksome, not being quite so fond of dancing and young ladies as his gallant brother, ordered the phaeton round, and caused his daughters to perceive that he wished to go home, without any kind of doubt or hesitation.

So all wraps being secured, and the Colonel having taken a most tender leave of his last partner, the highly-conditioned horses went at their collars, and, after threading the unabated crowd, rattled along the smooth if winding track, by stumps, ditches, and yawning shafts, at a pace which, with luck and good driving, brought them in due time safe and sleepy to the avenue gate of Branksome Hall.

On the following morning Ernest received a letter from Charley Banks, by which he learned that his party would not arrive in the neighbourhood of Turonia for at least another fortnight—their advance being unavoidably slow. He cheerfully concluded, therefore, to spend the intervening time in the golden city, where he would have an opportunity of noticing the preparations for mustering the herd, in which he and Mr. Levison were jointly interested, and of acquiring new facts in a tolerably new field of observation.

He therefore took temporary leave of his very kind friends at the Hall, reserving to himself the right of occasional visits until he should depart, with his newly-acquired herd, for the 'waste lands of the Crown,' where the Great River flowed on, as in the long lonely æons of the past, through the vast plains and pine-bordered sand-hills of Rainbar.

Once domiciled in Turonia, Mr. Neuchamp found its society more various and entertaining than in any locality other than the metropolis which he had visited since his arrival in Australia. It was the flush and prosperous stage of a great alluvial goldfield. All things wore the golden tint, all bore the image and superscription of the modern Cæsar and Imperator.

Wonderfully unreal, and smacking of 'the golden prime of the good Haroun Alraschid,' was the careless magnificence with which large sums of money were acquired, spent, lost, and regained. Ernest visited the various banks, and saw bags and drawers in which the precious metal lay heaped in all forms, from the dull red heavy dust to the lump, ingots, and precious fragments, in which a thousand pounds' worth was lifted in the hand with as much ease as a paperweight. He saw the bronzed, stal-

wart miners handing insignificant-looking bags across the cedar counters, and crushing handfuls of ten-pound notes into their pockets as a schoolboy receives change for a shilling spent in marbles. He retired to rest about midnight, and on awaking at dawn heard the ceaseless click of the billiard balls in the adjacent saloon, apparently fated to go on until the day again merged into midnight. He found the *table d'hôte* every day filled, not to say crowded, by well-dressed people whose occupation he could at first merely guess at, but whom he found to be in nearly every case connected with the great industry —as officials, mine-owners, brokers, speculators, professional men, and others unspecified, with perhaps a rare tourist, lured hither by astounding rumours, or a feeling of justifiable curiosity, to behold the unbounded treasures of mother earth, so long and jealously guarded. There was a never-failing store of amusement and occupation spread out before the calibre of Mr. Neuchamp, and so absorbed did he grow daily in the ever-widening field of observation that he felt almost regretful to find the time at his disposal rapidly diminishing.

In no more friendly and hospitable region had he ever sojourned. He was voted an acquisition by the officials, and made free of all their small gatherings and merry-meetings. One day the Commissioner would drive him out to inspect a great sluicing claim, where the water, brought through races by miles of fluming, spouted clear and strong over heaps of auriferous earth, as when it left its far-away mountain rill. On another occasion he was invited to witness the hearing and settlement of a great mining dispute, 'on the ground,' where a thousand excited men were gathered—the evidence heard upon oath, and the immutable decision of the Lord High Commissioner

given, by which the one moiety was deprived of all right to a presumable fortune, and the other gifted with a clear title to the same. Much temporary excitement and even irritation was produced by each and every such verdict. But miners, as a rule, are a law-abiding body; and, the mining laws of the period being as those of the Medes and Persians, all effervescence, however apparently allied to physical force, rapidly subsides.

In the intervals of such experiences and recreations, Mr. Neuchamp did not abstain from joining in diurnal billiard tournaments, and the nightly whist parties, in which trials of chance and skill he invariably found himself associated with Mr. Lionel Greffham and other pleasant persons, who, appearing to have no visible means of subsistence, were invariably well dressed, well appointed, and well provided with the needful cash. Mr. Greffham constituted himself his constant companion and mentor; the charm of his unremitting courtesy, joined to varied and racy experiences, with a never-failing flow of entertaining conversation, gradually broke down Ernest's caution and reserve. They became, if not sworn friends, habitual acquaintances, and under his apparently disinterested guidance the time passed pleasantly enough. Yet Ernest began to perceive that, after the first few successes, his losings at cards and billiards commenced to add up to more serious totals than he had thought possible at the commencement of his sojourn at Turonia.

More than once Ernest fancied that the keen eyes of Mr. Merlin wore a depreciatory, not to say contemptuous, expression when fixed upon Mr. Greffham. The Commissioner evidently disapproved of him in a general way, and Mr. Bright, who was open and bold of speech, once took occasion to remark, *àpropos* of the elegant but

inscrutable Lionel, that he considered him 'to be a d—d scoundrel, who would stick at *nothing* in the way of villainy, if he had anything considerable to gain by it.' But at this stage Ernest, at no time of a distrustful disposition, had formed an estimate of this fascinating free-lance too favourable to be shaken by mere assertion unsupported by proof.

One morning, for some reason, an unusually large amount of gold and notes was despatched from one of the banks, with the object of meeting a branch escort a day's ride from Turonia. Two troopers were detached for this service. They carried the compact but precious burden before them in valises strapped to their saddles.

A small group of *habitués* of the Occidental assembled to witness their departure, and Mr. Neuchamp bestowed much commendation upon the condition of the horses, the efficient appearance of arms and accoutrements, and the soldierly and neat appearance of the men. Curious to remark, Greffham was not among the admiring crowd, and Ernest alluded to the fact to the Inspector of Police, who was officially present.

'What has become of Greffham?' he inquired. 'One would have sworn that we should have seen him here!'

Mr. Merlin replied that 'Mr. Greffham was probably away upon business'; but a bystander volunteered the information that he had seen Mr. Greffham mounted, at daylight, upon his famous hackney Malakoff, apparently on the road to an adjacent diggings.

'Where can he be going, Merlin?' said Ernest. 'He arranged to drive me over to the Hall to-day.'

Mr. Merlin replied, stiffly, that Greffham had appar-

ently changed his mind, and that he, Merlin, had not the slightest acquaintance with Mr. Greffham's business affairs.

Mr. Neuchamp felt quietly repelled by this answer, and the cold indifference with which it was given. He came to the conclusion that Merlin was unnecessarily formal, and by no means so pleasant an acquaintance as the absent one. He was not fated to recover from the effects of his matutinal disappointment.

The Commissioner was up to his eyes in court business that day. Bright was unusually confined to his bank. Merlin disappeared on the trail of a cattle-stealer long and urgently 'wanted,' while every other member of the waif and stray corps, from the police magistrate to Horace Sherrington, seemed to have been snatched away by the Demon of Industry, or otherwise absorbed by abnormal influences. Long, dismal, and cheerless passed the hours of one of those broken, objectless days that are so peculiarly, unaccountably depressing. It was long—very long—since Ernest had spent so miserable a day. He regretted that he had not carried out his intention of visiting the Hall. He wondered when Charley Banks would arrive, and sincerely longed once more for the absorbing work of the muster and the march, telling himself that it would be long before he spent so idle a season again. The evening at length arrived, and with the gathering of the accustomed party at the dinner-table brighter thoughts possessed his mind. By the time that the evening game of billiards had fairly commenced, Mr. Neuchamp's equable habitude of mind had reasserted itself.

They had not been long occupied with this fascinating exercise, wonderfully suited to so many shades of char-

acter, when Greffham lounged in, calm and *insouciant*, as usual. At the first opening in the game he took his favourite cue and played his usually cool and occasionally brilliant game. If he had been in the saddle the long day through, no trace of more than ordinary exercise or excitement was visible in the *soigné* attire, which seemed a part of the man's being, or on his calm, impassive features. His play differed not in the slightest degree from his ordinary form, which always showed improvement towards the close, with perfect unconsciousness as to whether he was apparently winning or losing the game. He made his customary break, and, betting upon a five stroke at the finish, gave a shade of odds upon the success of his concluding 'coup.' He spoke of a longish ride as far as an outlying quartz reef, in which he had an interest, and mentioned having encountered the two gold-laden troopers at an inn which they would pass towards the end of their day's journey.

Half an hour later on Mr. Merlin dropped in, by no means so calm in his demeanour as Greffham, and full of complaints as to the abominable nature of the weather, the fleas, the dust, the danger of riding late among unprotected shafts, and many other disagreeables specially selected by fate for his deterioration and disgust on this appointed day.

While in this unchristian state of mind, for which he was mildly taken to task by Greffham, he was called out by a waiter, who informed him that 'a gentleman wished to see him.'

'Oh, certainly,' quoth the unappeased official with sardonic politeness; 'most happy, I'm sure. *I very seldom see one.*'

With this Parthian shaft at the entire community,

which was accepted as a perfectly permissible and characteristic pleasantry, Mr. Merlin quitted the room to greet the aforesaid rare and precious personage. He did not return; and after a little unlimited loo, in which Mr. Greffham transferred the larger portion of Ernest's ready money to his own pocket, the company separated for the night.

It was moderately early on the morrow when Mr. Neuchamp presented himself in the main street of Turonia. He was at once instinctively aware that something strange had happened.

The ordinary life and labour of the busy human hive seemed arrested. Men stood in groups at the sides, the corners, the centres of the streets, conversing in low tones with bated breath, as it seemed to Ernest. The very air was heavy and laden with horror—unexplained, mysterious—until above the hum and confused murmurs came, ominous and unmistakable, the one darkest irrevocable word 'murder!'

It was even so. Mr. Bright, walking briskly down the street, accosted him, and in the next breath asked if he had heard the news.

'Very dreadful thing—very,' said the sympathising banker, trying vainly to subdue his cheerful visage. 'Never had anything so terrible happened at Turonia since it was a goldfield. Merlin, Greffham, and I are going to ride out to the spot to-morrow. Would you like to come?'

'With pleasure,' said Ernest; 'that is, I shall go as a matter of duty. But what is up?'

'Just this——' said Bright. 'But surely you must have heard it?'

'Not a word,' replied Ernest. 'Pray go on. I have

suspected something wrong, but have not the faintest idea what it is.'

'Henderson and Carroll,' said Bright solemnly, 'two of the men in the force, the troopers that you saw start with the gold, were yesterday found *dead*—murdered, evidently—near the Running Creek. All the gold and bank notes have been taken, and the police have no more idea who the murderer is than you or I have. Have you, Merlin?' he asked of that gentleman, who now joined them.

'Are there any bushrangers or bad characters known to be in the neighbourhood?' asked Mr. Neuchamp. 'I have always thought it a perfect marvel that so little overt crime existed among this immense assemblage of men, with so many exciting causes. There must be *very few* criminals, or else they keep very quiet.'

'*We* know of scores of men of the very worst class and most desperate character,' replied Mr. Merlin; 'but, as you say, they have been kept very quiet. Still it never does to relax caution, as, if a sufficiently "good thing," in their phraseology, turns up, they are always ready to run all risks for the spoil. You have pushed against men who have committed more than *one* or even two murders. I saw you talking to one the other day by the Chinaman's store in Stanley Street.'

'Good heaven!' said Ernest, much moved, 'you don't say so? And was that quiet, sober-looking man that I was chatting with—I remember him quite well now—a known criminal?'

'One of the worst we have,' rejoined the Inspector in a matter-of-fact tone. 'A cold-blooded, treacherous ruffian. He *dares* not drink on account of what he might

let out; but we know where he has been and all about him this time. He was not near the spot.'

At this moment a telegram was put into the Inspector's hand, which he read carefully and showed to Ernest.

'Of course this is strictly confidential,' he said.

The telegram ran as follows:—

Notes traced, known to have been in the packet forwarded by escort. Arrest Jones.

'This gives a clue, of course, but,' said the official with diplomatic reserve, 'we may or may not follow it up. Possibly we may be thrown out; but eventually I venture to think Mr. Jones will be run into in the open.'

'Arrest Jones,' repeated Mr. Neuchamp. 'And have you been able to secure him?'

'I don't know whether the police have got hold of him yet,' said Mr. Merlin cautiously; 'but I daresay we shall be able to give an account of him by and by. If not, he will be the first man who has got clear off since this goldfield was discovered.'

'In the meantime you are going out to view the scene of the murder and the bodies of these poor fellows just as a matter of form and for your own satisfaction?'

'Precisely so,' assented Mr. Merlin; 'principally as a matter of form.'

'And Greffham is going with us just for company, like Bright, to make up the party, I suppose?' continued Ernest. 'It is very good-natured of him, for he told me yesterday that he had some important business to-day, and that he would not be about the town. But I have always found him most obliging.'

'So have I, most obliging, as you say. The fact is, he knows the spot exactly where these poor fellows must have been met.'

'But that Jones,' said Ernest eagerly, 'what a ruffian! what a cold-blooded villain he must have been! How I should like to fall across him. I could cheerfully go to see him hanged.'

'Perhaps you may have that gratification yet,' replied Mr. Merlin with a grim smile. 'More unlikely things have happened. Hallo! here comes Greffham.'

The gentleman referred to now sauntered up, accurately turned out in quite the best boots and breeches which Ernest had seen since he left England. His hunting scarf was adorned with the regulation Reynard brooch, and from throat to long-necked, heavy polished spur he was altogether *point-device.*

He looked a shade paler, probably from the effect of his yesterday's long ride, but his smile was as ready, his repartee as incisive, as ever, while his light-blue eye fell with its usual glance of cold scrutiny upon the advanced guard of the party.

'What a fellow you are, Merlin,' said he, 'starting at this unearthly hour. Why didn't you give a man a chance of a little sleep, who had, what you never get, a day's work yesterday?'

'My dear Greffham,' replied the Inspector with irresistible urbanity, 'I was certain that you and Bright would enjoy the fresh morning air above all things. I know he's a terribly early riser, and you can wake when it suits you; so I determined, under the circumstances, upon an early start.'

'All right,' quoth Bright; 'I don't care how early you get away. It can't be too early for me.'

'And besides, Greffham,' said Merlin, 'you know the short cut to Running Creek, which not every one can find. I propose to stay the night at the Ten-Mile Inn, and to make for the scene of the murder next day.'

'Come on, then,' said Greffham harshly; 'what the devil are we standing prating for? If you are in such a cursed hurry why don't you get away instead of standing here burning daylight?'

'We were waiting for Markham,' said Merlin good-humouredly, 'but I daresay the old fellow will pull up. Come along, then. I'm awfully obliged to you for coming, Greffham; I am indeed!'

Mr. Neuchamp had before remarked the extreme readiness of most people upon the goldfield to accede to any wish expressed by Mr. Merlin, and he recurred to it for the edification of Mr. Greffham, citing it as an instance of the very remarkable courtesy of manner which, as he was never tired of noting, distinguished the inhabitants of the settlement of Turonia.

Greffham listened in silence to Ernest's philosophical utterances, and, lighting a cigar, rode steadily forward. Here Ernest was impressed with the fact that, as a party, they were unusually well armed, as also well mounted. The four troopers, one couple of whom rode in front as scouts, while another pair followed at easy distance, had each a Snider carbine. A 'navy' revolver hung at each man's belt. Their horses were uncommonly well bred and in really good condition. Merlin, of course, never by any chance stirred without his revolver; and he was on his favourite Arab hackney, Omar Pacha, an indomitable gray, of proverbial pace and endurance. Mr. Bright had two revolvers, beside a pocket Derringer, which latter had a trick of going off unexpectedly, and had once

'made it hot' for a friend and brother banker. Greffham was apparently unarmed, but he never permittted any one to know more than he wished even in the most trifling matters. He was an 'ace-of-clubs' man with the pistol, and, had duelling been fashionable at Turonia, he would no doubt have distinguished himself after much the same fashion as the hard-drinking 'blazers' of the Wild West a hundred years agone.

Before they had gone half a dozen miles they were overtaken by a squarely built man on a bay cob, who interchanged a hasty but hardly visible signal with Mr. Merlin, and fell into the rear. The newcomer was a clean-shaved, Saxon-looking person, not very unlike a snug tradesman. He made an ordinary remark or two to Greffham and then subsided into obscurity. *He* also was well armed, and bore himself in a quietly resolute manner that impressed Mr. Neuchamp much.

The day was hot, the road sandy, and, as it appeared to Ernest, more tiresome than bush roads of similar nature were apt to be. The conversation, which had been general and well sustained at first, fell off gradually, until each man rode silently on, fanning the flies from his face, and apparently becoming more irritable, hot, and uncomfortable as the day wore on.

The only exception to this result of the tedious wayfaring was Mr. Merlin. He apparently did not suffer in temper, spirits, or natural comfort from the exigencies of the journey. He kept up an even flow of conversation with Greffham and Bright, albeit the former chiefly answered in monosyllables, and the latter freely cursed the road, the day, the flies, and the unwarrantable and misplaced sympathy which had caused him to accompany the expedition.

But the day drags on, whether the stormy north refuses the traveller the sight of the sun, or the languid south bestows too much of that indispensable potentate. The welcome coolness and dim shades of eve had commenced when the wayside inn was reached, the last roof shelter which the dead had known, where they had quaffed their last draught and possibly told their last jest. On the bank of a creek at some few miles' distance they had determined to make their camp, preferring it for some reasons to the inn. And there they had found their last resting-place.

Ernest remembered noticing the care and completeness which marked the men's equipment, their muscular, well set-up figures, their easy seats as they rode their high-constitutioned, well-bred horses up the street on the morning of their departure. And now they lay prone and motionless among the thick withering grass; above them waved the melancholy, sighing casuarina, from the branches of which croaked the raven—far-scenting herald of doom, sable watcher by the dead. As he thought of the manly, pleasant faces he could recall so easily, but of yesterday, as it seemed, the strongest feelings of wrath and hatred were stirred within him, and he muttered an imprecation of swift vengeance upon the head of the cold-blooded assassin Jones, if that indeed were the name of a wretch unfit to cumber earth. The sad surroundings, the gloomy tone of Mr. Neuchamp's thoughts, did not lead him to decline the respectable meal to which he found himself bidden along with the gentlemen of the party.

Markham and the troopers occupied another apartment, in which they made themselves fairly comfortable. The horses were stabled, and, save for the inevitable

death-scene of the morrow, the evening would have passed not uncheerfully. As it was, however, Mr. Merlin organised whist, and even encouraged a little quasi-gambling by proposing higher stakes than usual. The chief result of which was that Mr. Neuchamp, having the experienced Lionel Greffham for a partner, won more money than he had lost in many an unsuccessful night in Turonia. In vain did Bright and Merlin 'plunge' by way of recouping their losses. The luck of Mr. Greffham was altogether too good; and Merlin, about midnight, gave in, saying, 'You have the devil's luck, as usual, Greffham. I wonder how long it will stick to you.'

'Who knows?' answered he indifferently, ringing the bell and ordering refreshment on a liberal scale. 'It has held on pretty well so far. It may turn, though, and then I think I could find a bullet for myself and a quiet couch.'

'Really now, my dear Greffham,' said Merlin, 'if I did not know you well, I should think you were threatening what no man of sense ever puts into practice. But I have seen luck stick to a man until the actual and inexorable finale. Then he and all the world had to acknowledge that they had been mistaken—more mistaken—most mistaken—in their previous calculations and investments. Don't you think we could manage another whisky before we turn in? I must have my smoke, anyhow.'

Ernest thought this, for him, unnecessary, and fell back upon soda-water; but Greffham, apparently, was disinclined for immediate retirement. He and Merlin sat up long, telling apparently never-ending, half-forgotten tales, and smoking furiously.

As Mr. Neuchamp, restless and feverish, chose to get up at dawn and pace the verandah, he saw Markham and

Merlin holding colloquy in low tones, amid which he involuntarily caught the sound, on Markham's side, of the words 'all right.'

Shortly after the sharply disciplined troopers were astir at stable duty, and at sunrise the whole party were on their way to the fatal creek.

Bright and himself, Mr. Neuchamp thought, looked the freshest of the party, having had a few hours of sound sleep. Merlin's spirits were high, as on the previous day. Greffham looked if anything more indifferent, more calm and careless about all earthly concerns, his fellow-creatures in particular, than usual.

'It was by this track, round this very clump of pines, that you saw the men ride off, Greffham?' said Merlin. 'It is quite fortunate that you should be in a position to state your impression at a time which could not have been many hours before their deaths. How did they look? Do you think they had been drinking?'

'Can't say,' answered Greffham after a pause, as if trying to recall the exact circumstances. 'Carroll was a reserved, sulky-looking beggar, I always thought; one of those men that you could not tell liquor upon as long as he could keep his legs. Now I think of it, they did look rather stupid.'

'You are quite correct about Carroll, old fellow,' said Merlin airily; 'he *was* reserved and taciturn, a ridiculously unsuitable habit of mind for a subordinate. Odd thing that nothing has been heard of the gold or notes.'

'I suppose whoever took them,' said Greffham—'(try one of these cigars, little Seguadil sent me a box)—whoever took them had sense enough to conceal them for a while. The gold will turn up eventually.'

'But not the notes, you think?' persisted Merlin.

'Not unless there is something uncommon about them—(this cigar won't draw)—numbers taken and so on. If they are the ordinary well-thumbed paper-promises current at diggings, they will be hardly identifiable.'

'Very likely you are right. Deuced good cigar that. I wish the little beggar would send me some of that Amontillado of his; that and his Manzanares might really have come out of the King of Spain's cellar, as he used to aver. But the road improves now, we may as well canter. Famous horse of yours, Greffham, nothing like him in Turonia.'

'Why, Merlin,' said Bright, 'what a heavenly temper we are in this morning! Biliary secretions unusually right, I should say!'

'Of course, Bright, of course; there's no credit to a jolly, sanguine fellow like you for being in a good temper. Nature in your case has done so much that it would be the basest ingratitude if you did not second her efforts. Now spare fellows, like the elegant Lionel here and myself, with whom indigestion is more the rule than the exception, only require to feel free from torment to be in the seventh heaven. But here we are at the Running Creek. Look at the eagles already gathered.'

## CHAPTER XXIII

A BODING gloom seemed to fall suddenly like a pall from the branches of the sighing, whispering, sad-voiced water-oaks, as they followed the winding track which led along the bank of the tiny streamlet to the small alluvial flat, upon which lay two—pah, what shall I say?—two figures covered with rugs, which may or may not have exhibited the human outline. 'They lay as dead men only lie.' A swarm of flies arose at the lifting of the coverings, and a terrible and intolerable odour diffused itself around. 'Great God!' cried Ernest, 'are these repulsive, fast-decaying masses of corruption all that are left of the high-hearted, gallant fellows I saw ride out of Turonia so short a while ago? Poor human nature, upon ever so slight summons, and must we come to this! Accursed be the greed of the yellow gold which brought our brother men to so hideous an ending.'

As these reflections flowed from the sympathetic heart of Ernest Neuchamp with a natural force that could not be controlled, he turned in time to notice that Mr. Merlin had directed the coverings to be removed from the corpses, and had instituted, in spite of their revolting condition after forty-eight hours' exposure to a burning sun, a thorough and searching examination.

One man, Carroll, lay on his side with face half upturned and arm outstretched, in the hand of which was grasped a revolver with a barrel discharged. An expression of defiance was still legibly imprinted upon the features — a bullet wound through the centre of the forehead had without doubt been the cause of death. The strong man had fallen prone, as if struck by lightning, and for ever, ever more the wondrous infinitely complicated machine was arrested. The soul had passed into the region of endless life, death, sleep, sorrow, joy!

'This man has been shot from the front, Greffham, shouldn't you say?' pronounced the clear, incisive tones of Mr. Merlin. 'He may or may not have been standing up to his assassin. If so, it was a species of duel, and the best shot and quickest had it. If you wouldn't care about standing there, now, by that oak-tree, raise your arm, so; by Jove, you would be just in the position that the man must been in that dropped the poor sergeant.'

'Just the sort of thing that Greffham would have gone in for if he was hard up,' said Mr. Bright, chuckling. He was reckless as to the flavour of his jests, far from particular if only they were 'hot' enough.

'You are always thinking of that gold-buyer of yours that was shot, Bright,' said Greffham, wincing uneasily, though, under the concentrated gaze of three remarkably steady pairs of eyes,—Merlin's, Bright's, and Markham's. 'It's my belief that Halliday shot himself; he was something like you, in always carrying half a bushel of revolvers, and, like your battery, it went off accidentally sometimes.'

'There's a boot mark in the sand underneath that oak-tree,' said Markham, with great suavity; 'it's the very

model of your track, Mr. Greffham, that you made there. Excuse *me*, sir.'

'I suppose other people wear boots as well as I,' he said. 'Bushmen and diggers are deuced rough, and all that, but they haven't come to going barefoot yet.'

'Nor wearing French boots with very narrow heels,' said Markham, as he measured the imprint of the said *bottine* with a small pocket rule. 'However, boots don't go for much, unless corroborated.' With this sapient speech Mr. Markham closed his remarks and apparently lost interest in the scene.

'Now this poor fellow,' interpolated Mr. Merlin, lifting up the trooper's face, and parting the thickly clustering brown curls, 'has been shot from *behind*. Here's the little hole through the back of his head, and the pistol must have been pretty close, as the powder has burned one side of it considerably. He has simply fallen over on his face, and there was an end of him. Here you can see where the valise containing the gold and notes was unstrapped from Sergeant Carroll's saddle. The saddles had been put back to back on the ground. One carbine is here still, and one is missing.'

'By Jove!' said Greffham, 'you know everything, Merlin. You're like the man in the *Arabian Nights* who described the camel that had passed the day before,—lame, blind of an eye, having lost two front teeth, and loaded half with rice and half with dates, and yet never saw him at all. You're a wonderful fellow! You're so devilish sharp.'

'And you're a more wonderful fellow; you're so devilish cool,' said Merlin. 'I *do* know a thing or two, and, upon my soul, I have need—*par exemple*, old fellow—it was devilish good-natured of you to come out all

the way with us, but it has just occurred to me that you seem to have seen these poor fellows so *very* lately, just before they were rubbed out, that, quite as a matter of form, I must trouble you to explain your proceedings on that day to the authorities. Lionel Greffham!' continued he, in a voice which, raised and vibrating, was so utterly changed that Ernest Neuchamp did not know it as that of this smiling satirist with his society talk and ready rapier of repartee, 'I arrest you on suspicion of murder and robbery.'

Perhaps the least astonished and agitated individual of the company was the accused himself. He swung round on one heel as Merlin laid a sinewy grasp upon his shoulder, and, drawing a small foreign-looking revolver from his breast, aimed fair at the heart of his quondam companion. At the same moment he was covered by the weapons of Markham, the troopers, and of Mr. Bright, who held straight for his former acquaintance with unmistakable aim and determination.

'It's no use, Mr. Greffham,' said Markham, 'I made your popgun safe at the inn last night. It would never have done to leave you the chance of giving us "Squirt Street." It won't pop if you pull the trigger for a week. Say you could drop Mr. Merlin, why we can "twice" you over and over.'

Mr. Merlin's clear gray eyes glittered with unwonted excitement. He also held a revolver in his right hand. 'My dear fellow,' he said, 'all excitement is bad form. You must be aware that you are only arrested on suspicion. Nothing may turn up to implicate you any more than Bright there, but in all these cases a man in my position has a duty to perform, and you know well I

should do mine if you were my own brother, or the best friend I had in the world.'

By this time Greffham had recovered his usual composure. 'I don't doubt *that* for one moment, Merlin,' he said, with sardonic emphasis. 'I think you have such a talent in that line that you would rather enjoy "running in" your own father. However, business is business. You've thrown down your card, and as you seem to hold all the trumps at present, you must have the odd trick.'

'Precisely, precisely,' assented Mr. Merlin; 'I always thought you a devilish sensible fellow. So now we must make a start for home. I am afraid that I must—just as a matter of form, you know—Markham.'

That wary official moved forward, and noticing, without seeing, as it were, that his superior officer still held his revolver ready for immediate use, produced a pair of handcuffs, and with the ease and quickness of long experience slipped them over the wrists of him who was doomed never to sleep unfettered more.

The party, now become a procession, moved quietly homeward to Turonia. They halted at the inn, the landlord of which was considerably surprised at seeing the great Mr. Greffham's hands closed before him, while a trooper led his horse by a rein. Up to this period he had not the smallest suspicion that the lavish swell, who, like all men who affected wholesale piracy, was 'quite the gentleman' in the matter of free spending of money, could be possibly mixed up with a cold-blooded murder and an extensive robbery. But now his intellect being permitted freedom, he remembered that Mr. Greffham had called at his inn at no long time after the troopers, one of whom he knew well, and furthermore that he remembered hearing a shot at a great distance. It might

have been a revolver. He could not say. It was firearms of some sort. Might have been two shots. Saw nothing.

Ernest observed that Markham noted down in a large pocket-book the exact minute and hour of the faint report of firearms to which the innkeeper testified, the exact time at which the troopers were last seen alive by him, and the time of the arrival of Greffham; and those minor matters being definitely settled, Mr. Merlin conducting the interrogation in a very different voice from his society one, the subdued, if not noticeably saddened procession took the road for Turonia. It was late when they reached that somewhat peculiar settlement, but the streets were profusely lighted, busy, and more thronged than at noonday. When the modern inland Australian substitute for 'a plump of spears beneath a pennon gay' rode straight for the camp, the foremost trooper leading the horse of a manacled prisoner, whom many keen eyes at once recognised as Lionel Greffham, a low but savage murmur came from the dense and excited crowd. Whatever interest or enthusiasm might have been evoked in Mr. Newchamp's breast by the wonders and novelties of the great goldfield and its heterogeneous, picturesque population, had now collapsed. A feeling of doubt and horror succeeded. A tinge of blood, a brooding death-shadow, was over the splendour and the glamour of the enormous treasure-pile which now in ceaseless, countless profusion seemed daily won from the reluctant earth. He heard to his great satisfaction that Mr. Banks and his party had arrived; that Levison's manager, a man of boundless experience in stock, more particularly cattle, was already hard at work at the muster, and that every day an increasing number of the female cattle destined

for Rainbar was drafted and delivered to the 'tailing mob' in Mr. Banks's charge.

Satisfying himself by inspection that the very ordinary routine work of mustering a herd, when the mere numbers and sex were alone concerned, and where no battles had to be fought over individuals of disputed age, size, or quality, could be very safely delegated to subordinates, Ernest rode over to Branksome Hall for a farewell visit.

There he found himself an object of interest and friendly welcome, somewhat heightened by his late adventurous journey in company with Mr. Merlin. The young ladies were deeply shocked at the terrible finale to their acquaintance, slight as it had ever been, with the unhappy man who was now a prisoner and presumably a felon, where once he had shone a star of the first magnitude. Mr. Branksome was sufficiently a man of the world to have always distrusted the handsome and unscrupulous adventurer. Beyond a formal call he had never been encouraged to see much of the interior of the Hall.

'Terrible affair this, Neuchamp,' said the host, as the whole party sat in the drawing-room before that evening summons had sounded which few are sufficiently philosophical or sympathetic to decline. 'I never had a high opinion of Greffham—always distrusted the man, but as to his murdering a couple of poor devils of troopers for the sake of a couple of thousand ounces of gold, why, I should as soon have expected him to have dropped strychnine into one's soup-plate at the Occidental at lunch.'

'Never fancied him,' said the Colonel; 'deuced well-dressed, well-set-up fellow; been in a cavalry regiment.

But he had a cold-blooded, hard way of looking at one—bad eye too, cruel, devilish cruel—that man has taken life before, I swear—know the expression well, killing is not the fashion much in this country, too young yet—life too valuable—you don't know the signs of it.'

'I can hardly bear to speak of it,' said the eldest Miss Branksome. 'To think that *any one* of education and gentleman-like habit, for he *was* a gentleman as far as manner, appearance, every outward observance can make one, should have descended so low, gone down into the very pit of murder and theft, for what? What could have driven him to the edge of such a precipice? Surely there must be demons and fiends who have power over men's souls.'

'Extravagance, gambling, the habit of spending money without working for it,' said her father. 'Debt in one shape or other is one of the demons allotted to torment mortality in this period of the world's history. The demoniac of the age is the man who has bills or liabilities coming due without the means to meet them. He may appear ordinarily clothed and in his right mind, but, after some torturing hour, it may be related of him, as of this unhappy wretch, the evil "spirit tare him," and he "wallowed foaming."'

'It seems a wonderful thing that he didn't apply to some of his friends, doesn't it?' queried Mr. Neuchamp. 'He seemed to have plenty of them. Even if he had not been completely put right they could surely have given him enough to secure breathing time; but murder, robbery, pah! it is purely incredible to me, predicated of a man that we have all met more or less in habits of intimacy.'

'Nothing so wonderful about that,' said the Colonel;

'deuced cool, clever adventurer, you know, without one morsel of feeling in favour of what some people call principle, humanity, or honesty. Seen the style before. Big loot of any kind is the thing to bring out such a man in real form. Known fellows in Indian service too, by gad, who would kill a prisoner in cold blood or burn half a village for the sake of a few diamonds or a hoard of gold mohurs.'

'It's positively awful, dreadful, miserable,' said the youngest Miss Branksome. 'I shall dream of nothing else for a month, I know. Papa, isn't that the dinner bell? Now there's a forfeit if anybody says a word about gold or murder or anything belonging to Turonia again this evening. We shall be quite demoralised with all this Fouché business. There's Mr. Bright begins to look as if he was going to act upon "information received" every time I see him.'

The inmates of that pleasant home finished the evening without overt allusion to the awful tragedy which had overshadowed their neighbourhood, and brought dishonour and death, rare visitors ere this, even to the reckless, toiling, far-gathered goldfields community. But in every heart, from time to time, in the pause of the conversation, in the silence of the night hour, arose the dimly-outlined picture of the lonely flat where the sighing oaks whispered and faintly wailed over two motionless figures, dread and silent, among the thick, dry, waving grass. On the reverse shadow-tracery a well-known figure, with an evil light in the cold blue eyes, a hellish sneer on the short, curved lip, was pacing the gloomy flags of a felon's cell!

Though Mr. Neuchamp on the morrow parted with great regret from his kind friends of Branksome Hall, he could

not conceal from himself that Turonia, under the circumstances, would be the last place in which he should choose to linger. A shadow of gloom, a savour of blood, was with the whole place and surroundings in his eyes, and though the streets still trembled as before under the tread of an army of Britain's best workers, and though at night there was store of pleasant society and excitement, all interest in the gold city had marvellously abated. Mr. Neuchamp was impatient until his moving contingent should be ready for the road, and to that end betook himself with grateful energy to the distraction of mustering the herd.

With the efficient aid of Mr. Cottonbush, the much-experienced overseer deputed by Mr. Levison to carry out this particular duty, the whole herd was mustered and drafted with an economy of time and completeness of result very astonishing to Ernest.

His part was confined to giving Mr. Cottonbush a receipt for nineteen hundred and seventy head of female cattle of all sorts, sizes, and ages, and having divided the said cows and heifers into two droves, an immediate departure was made for Rainbar. Mr. Banks was permitted to examine and explore the wonders of Turonia for the space of one day only; and after bidding farewell to his friends at the camp and at Branksome Hall, Mr. Neuchamp rejoined his party, manfully performing his share of road work until, after many a weary week's travelling and monotonous daily drudgery, they struck the river within a day's ride of Rainbar.

When Mr. Neuchamp once more alighted at the door of his cottage he felt the pleasurable glow which is rarely absent from the mind of any healthily constituted man returning after absence to his home.

'Home, sweet home!' hummed Mr. Neuchamp. 'I don't know whether the time-honoured words strictly apply to Rainbar, but I'm glad to see the old place again. The grass looks none too fresh, though, as if they had had little or no rain. It would have been inspiriting to have seen a little green after all the terrible dry weather we have had. I suppose these two thousand new cattle will be able to keep alive. As for paying for them, if I had not Levison's advice and guarantee to depend upon, I should utterly despair of it.'

He had finished his evening meal when Mr. Jack Windsor was announced, that gentleman having been all day 'out back,' and having but just returned. He was unaffectedly glad to see Ernest, and gave a favourable account of the stock and station matters generally.

'I don't say as we've had much of a break-up of the dry time,' he said, 'but the rains come very stiddy and soaking every now and then. Besides, there's been one or two fine thunderstorms out back, where I've been to-day. The feed's a deal better than any I see in here. We're a-getting on towards the end of the autumn now, and we might have a regular wet season, that will just crown us. I suppose the store cattle is all right.'

'In very fair strength and spirits, Jack. Mr. Banks thought that they would do splendidly here before spring, if there was any rain at all.'

'If it wasn't for these confounded cockies,' said Mr. Windsor, 'that big flat would be a first-rate place to break 'em into, while they'll have to be at the water every day. But it's no use thinking of it. I've had a deal of bother with 'em as it is; them boys are always cutting about the run on horseback, looking for a calf, or a colt, or something. I'd give a tenner out of my own pocket

they was all out of that and back at Bowning or some other stringy-bark hole as is fit for 'em.'

Three days had elapsed since this conversation, when the two large droves of patient, slow-moving cattle arrived at Rainbar. Mr. Windsor was much impressed by their general appearance, and asserted confidently that such a lot of cows and heifers had never before been seen on the river.

'They're regular first-class bred 'uns, that's what they are,' he asserted: 'that's the best of going in with a man like Levison. He's always got the sugar, consequence he always gets the worth of his money, and doesn't get put off with half-and-half goods. He knows a thing or two, does Levison. Anyhow he's a stunning mate to go shares with.'

After a short time spent in making necessary arrangements for the new arrivals, Mr. Neuchamp commenced to review his position. Much seriousness of visage resulted from the financial examination.

In the first place no cattle had been sold in his absence. Nor were there now any in sufficiently high condition to be turned into cash with the same facility as of old. A considerable hole had been made in the overdraft which Messrs. Oldstile and Crampton had grudgingly permitted him. He had signed bills at twelve months' date for the late purchase of cattle; and accommodating as Mr. Levison might be, the acceptances would have to be met or provided for at maturity. Prospectively profitable as the transaction was, Mr. Neuchamp commenced to make acquaintances with the ominous suggestion, 'Bankruptcy,' and to wonder whether he should *really*, in spite of all his plans, prudence, and philanthropy, be compelled, even as others were whom

he had contemptuously pitied in old times, to surrender unconditionally.

Of this dread and final catastrophe Mr. Neuchamp had a lively horror which no sophistry could abate. He was not one to fall back upon the many excuses and palliations which the fluctuating markets, the uncertain season, afforded. No, no; the stoppage of payment meant Ruin and Disgrace. It would sound the knell of hope, would proclaim dishonour inevitable, irrevocable, as well as the total failure of all the plans and projects which his heart held dearest. His perusal of the newspapers, which had accumulated to a goodly pile in his absence, brought no hint of indulgence. The markets were low; the season had not yet improved so as to place the stock out of danger. If all debts incurred were to be met, there was little expectation of being able to liquidate them by the aid of the stock then depasturing upon Rainbar.

More than this, he found among his correspondence an epistle from Messrs. Oldstile and Crampton, written in the very old-fashioned manner affected by that sound but non-progressive firm. It informed their very worthy and most esteemed constituent, Mr. E. Neuchamp, that the five hundred pounds last paid to his credit was exhausted, and that unless, of course, his account was supported by remittance, they could under *no circumstances* continue to honour his orders.

A letter from Paul Frankston, though kind and hearty in tone, was not reassuring. He said that the times were exceedingly bad,—so bad that even he, Paul, had had work to meet his engagements, and had at no time for many years past been so sorely pressed. He noticed that every day fresh station properties were being brought

into the market, and hoped that an utter crash and collapse of stock and stations was not about to take place, as in 1842-43. The only reason for believing that a favourable change would take place in the stock-market was that the yield of gold appeared to be increasing, and that though temporary inconvenience had taken place, he, Paul, fully believed that in the course of a year or two there would be a very different state of matters. He therefore advised Ernest to be hopeful, and, while keeping down expenses to the narrowest limit, to hold on to his station with his eyelids, so to speak. Those who had done so at any former period of the country's history were now wealthy men. He believed yet that Ernest, if he steadily adhered to his proper work and—pardon him—abstained from speculative experiments, would eventually do well. He hoped that he had got his newly-purchased store cattle safely on the run. He had the greatest confidence in Levison's unerring judgment in such matters. He might be unduly prejudiced in his favour, but he had never known him to be wrong. If everything went to the bad, no doubt this purchase would make matters no worse. If otherwise, they were the nucleus of a future, and not a small one either. His last advice was to keep the ordinary station work in the best possible trim, and not to spend one shilling in other than absolute necessities. Antonia was very well, but did nothing but read all day. He had suggested her going in for a degree at the University, but she had not cared for the suggestion. When rain came perhaps Ernest might manage another run down the country.

Mr. Neuchamp steadily devoted himself to a full consideration of the matters placed before him in this letter—considerate and delicate in feeling, as indeed had been

every word and line of advice received by him from Paul Frankston from the very beginning of their acquaintance. No one could have fancied that the whole of the obligation had been upon his, Ernest's, side, from the day when he first exploded Hartley Selmore's politico-economical arrangement for subsidising holders of station properties with the capital of ingenuous newly-arrived colonists. For how much generous hospitality, shrewd counsel, often implied rather than proffered, substantial assistance and unswerving friendship, was he not his debtor? And Antonia? The more he saw of girls generally,—and he did not rate those Australian young ladies, who had equal advantages of training, society, and culture, at a jot below their English contemporaries,—the more deep became his conviction of her unusual range of thought, depth of feeling, and purity of mind. As the dry, cool wind of the Australian autumn wailed and sighed over the wide gray plains, and around the useful but unromantic edifices which went to make up the homestead at Rainbar, Ernest began to feel a somewhat intensified, intolerable sensation of intellectual loneliness. For the hundredth, five hundredth, time he wished that it would rain. Why did it not rain? Was the land accursed, like Egypt in the olden Pharaoh days? Rain would do so much. Put an end to his anxieties about the stock. Improve the condition and lessen the expense of the new cattle. Perhaps, nay, certainly, send up the price of stock generally. Liberalise the ideas of Messrs. Oldstile and Crampton. Render a trip to town possible; and oh, the sight once more of the verandah at Morahmee! the savour of the fresh brine-laden air! the sight of the foam-fringed billows of the unbounded sea! the—— But the further contemplation of impossible delights,

rendered such by his now comparatively lengthened inland exile, was sternly repressed by the philosophic mind of Mr. Neuchamp. And rain, in England at least, had always seemed such a little thing—to be had for nothing: to be guarded against by the timid, complained about by the superficial, anathematised by the reckless, constant in and out of season—a nuisance, a drug, a daily dread. Why then, in the name of all the mighty, merciful powers, did it not rain? It was clearly no use fretting about the absence of the gladdening, fertilising phenomenon in a dry and thirsty land, or philosophising about the relation of monsoons to icebergs, any unusual protraction or prominence in which natural facts and forces of the calm unswerving giantess, Nature, might alter climates and prices, from Lake Alexandrina to the Snowy River, from Carpentaria to the county of Cumberland. The matter on hand was the plain and prosaic adjustment of his 'duty a dead sure thing,' and admitting of but little variation from the point.

Therefore for the present, and as day after day arose bright and cool, with breezy morn and pure fresh bracing atmosphere, unhappily suggestive of continuous *dry* weather, Mr. Neuchamp, discarding theories, reveries, and projects, sternly addressed himself to work. From earliest dawn to a late hour the whole of the little community was astir. It had been with a feeling of deep satisfaction that Ernest had watched, for the first time, the great droves of 'new cattle' spread, unchecked, over the Rainbar plain, and take their first meal of the scanty but highly nutritive salsolaceous herbage. Bred in a 'sour grass' country, far inferior for fattening purposes, though having merits of its own, the docile, highly-bred herd might be expected, under ordinary conditions, to grow

and develop in the most unprecedented manner. There is a peculiar pleasure, felt by all station proprietors, in the examination of the droves or flocks of store stock placed for the first time upon their new pastures. Generally purchased at a comparatively low price, and passing from inferior to superior fattening country, if the season be favourable a cheering alteration takes place. It is pleasant for the sheep-owner to perceive his 'large-framed healthy wethers' (as per advertisement) laying on condition day by day, passing through all the stages of comparative obesity which enables him to 'top the market' with them as fat sheep, having previously denuded them of a fleece which, perhaps, fully pays the cost of the original purchase.

But the gratification known to the purchaser of 'store' or 'lean' cattle, either for fattening or for increase, is of a higher and more intense, because of a more complex, nature, as becomes the more individualised character of the stock.

Day by day, if but the pasture be sufficient, the range wide, the weather favourable, the season propitious, the stockmen practised and efficient—if, I repeat, all these conditions be fulfilled—then indeed does the happy pastoralist taste all the joys of his successful and pleasant position. Day by day, as he rides forth in the fresh morn, the warm kind eve, he notes the stranger kine more habitually wander out to the springing pasture and back to the creek, marsh, river, which is their water privilege. He sees the steers grow glossy of hide, thicker, lengthier, ripen into marketable bullocks. He sees the tiny she yearlings grow into sonsy heifers; the angular cows into imposing, deep-brisketed, flat-backed matrons, ever and anon with younglets, 'to the manor

born,' and likely in time to pay double the original cost of the parent, with a high percentage for personal profit. Lastly, the first draft of bullocks picked from these, if a mixed herd, pays for the whole lot—steers, bullocks, cows, and calves—leaving the spirited purchaser with a tolerably large and increasing herd, all profit.

Many of these pleasurable emotions would have found lodging in the breast of Mr. Neuchamp had circumstances, that is, the season, been favourable. But nothing was favourable. The skies were like brass—even as the money market—with no rent or fissure through which mercy or change could by any means be perceived. The scanty pasture provoked the instinct-guided cattle to wander far and fast. In pursuit Ernest was fain to hurry, personally or vicariously, till every horse on the establishment, Osmund included, had as much as he could do to carry his rider for a day's slow journey. Indeed the said rider was occasionally to be descried carrying his saddle home upon his own proper back, having left his weak and weary steed out on the plain.

The original herd, every beast of which had been bred and reared at Rambar, was not altogether badly off. Acquainted with every nook and corner of the run, they 'went back' almost incredible distances for grass, only returning to the bare vicinity of the water when desperate with thirst. It is wonderful what privation in that respect the half-wild herds of cattle and horses will undergo in a dry country in a dry season, without seriously imperilling their health and strength. If they can only procure a debauch upon water from time to time, they stave off famine in a manner quite impossible to the shorthorns and unadventurous beeves of more rainy climes, more succulent pastures.

As to the members of the co-operative settlement—the cockatoos, as Jack Windsor incorrectly called them—they were not, in that time of trial, an element of help or consolation. Their cattle had increased even suspiciously fast. The untoward season had brought out the narrow greed and cunning of their natures into unpleasant prominence.

Under the impression that Ernest would most probably be ruined and be compelled shortly to sell Rainbar, they arrived at the conclusion that there was nothing to be gained by concession, and so gradually threw off any semblance of deference. They rigidly enforced the exclusion of the Rainbar cattle from their very extensive pre-emptive grass rights, and they hunted with their dogs new cattle and old indifferently, not particularly caring, it would seem, whether they were or were not lost.

Ernest was first grieved, then indignant, at this gross ingratitude. Under the influence of these feelings he expostulated with them warmly, alleging his right, as having advanced a portion of the purchase-money for their holdings, to some consideration, if the general sympathy and kindness which he had accorded to them was to go for nothing.

Abraham Freeman replied that they did not see that they had anything to thank him for, particularly that they had left good homes to come to this confounded dry sand-heap of a country. That they intended to stick up for their pre-emptives, as the cattle were all their dependence now, and that if he wanted to make terms with them, they would be satisfied with that portion of the run—with the river frontage, of course—which lay to the westward of their settlement. If he just gave

them the use of that bit of country—it was only five or six miles in length, and didn't go far back—then they would bind themselves *not to take up any more of his run.*

This last implied threat completed the obliteration of the last shred of Mr. Neuchamp's patience. These heartless, unprincipled wretches, whom he had raised from a position of indifferently paid toil, akin to daily labour, to that of thriving graziers, basely forgetful of his exceptional benevolence, were actually trading upon their power of annoyance and injurious occupation of his run! Very bitter were Mr. Neuchamp's reflections when this evil growth of human nature was thus indisputably proved. Had it not been so bad a season he might have overlooked it. But now, when fate and the very skies were at war with him, this instance of ingratitude overpowered all philosophic calmness.

He immediately convened a meeting of the heads of families of the house of Freeman, and informed them, in sufficiently decided tones, that he found himself to have been mistaken in his estimate of their principles and characters; that he had sought to benefit them chiefly; had already assisted them to a partial independence, and that he had looked for some decent recognition of his efforts for their sole advantage. They had chosen to deceive and to threaten. He was resolved now to confine them strictly to their land, to require repayment of the money which he had lent, and to hold no terms of any kind whatever with them.

Messrs. Freeman Brothers were somewhat astonished by Ernest's capacity for righteous indignation. They had not expected anything of the sort. They had looked

for unlimited toleration. They now began to consider that a declaration of war might possibly result injuriously to their own interests, and they possibly had the grace to remember that, up to this stage of the affair, Mr. Neuchamp had been considerate, or, in their phraseology, 'soft,' to an extent altogether unprecedented in their experience of the pastoral tenants of the Crown. They would have no more loading, an easy way of providing themselves with the very moderate amount of cash necessary for their ordinary expenditure.

Certainly they did not need any large outlay. There are few lands under the sun, the Coral Islands of that charmed main the Great South Sea excepted, where there is such a possibility of tranquil, joyous progress along life's pathway, without the use of the circulating medium, as in the settlements of the older colonies of Australia.

For instance, the Freemans had, as it were for nothing, house-room, fuel, water, and light. Their garden supplied them with an annual crop of pumpkins, melons, and other esculents, which gave them vegetable food for the greater part of the year. Far larger crops might have been produced by a comparatively trifling increase of labour or thought. They had milk, butter, and meat from their herd, in ordinary years in profusion. The few necessaries which they were absolutely reduced to import or purchase were clothes, of which, owing to the mildness of the climate, they needed but few; tea and sugar, salt and flour, with a trifling stock of household utensils and furniture. With respect to the tea and sugar, a large reduction might have been made in this section had it been the fashion, as it was the exceptional practice, of isolated settlers to substitute milk for the

former, as an ordinary adjunct to the three meals of the day.

But tea in Australia, grateful alike in the burning heat of summer and in the bitter frosts and sleet of winter — portable, innocuous, nutritive, and slightly stimulating—is the beer of the common people; and we know from experience that the attempt 'to rob a poor man of his beer' has always hitherto proved unpopular and unsuccessful.

We must therefore assume that a half-chest of tea and a couple of bags of medium brown sugar must be added to the expenditure of the small farmer, or 'free selector,' as he is now universally called.

Australia is not a good game country. Still the different varieties of the kangaroo are palatable and nutritious, more resembling the flesh of the hare and rabbit, with a flavour of veal, than beef or mutton. With the aid of a brace of rough greyhounds—the kangaroo-dog of the colonists—these are easily procured in any quantity. The skins are worth a shilling each, and are useful as mats or for coverings. The rivers and creeks, particularly the larger watercourses, are generally filled with fresh-water codfish and several other divisions of the perch family. These are considered to afford valuable supplementary aid to the perhaps scanty supply of butchers' meat, on many a far-out farm in summer time.

With regard to the condition of the rather exclusive settlement formed and owned by the Freeman family, they had each made shift to bring from a couple to half a dozen brood mares, perhaps originally purchased for from half-a-crown to half-a-sovereign each, out of the Bowning pound. These hardy, though not perhaps well-

bred, animals had increased wonderfully since their arrival, and were now, of themselves, quite a small herd. The younger members of the Freeman families could of course ride like Comanches, and no inconsiderable portion of their time was spent in running in these swift and half-wild mustangs, breaking them, losing them, finding them; and in all these operations and employment galloping around and across the Rainbar run, to the wrath and constant annoyance of Jack Windsor and Charley Banks.

Some effort was made, in a half-sullen, half-apologetic way, by Abraham Freeman to remove the ban under which the whole settlement lay. But Ernest was fixed and implacable in righteous disapproval. He gave strict orders that no stock of the offending co-operatives was to be permitted to graze upon the Rainbar run; that the boys were to be told that they would be summoned for trespass if they were found riding over the run or driving stock off without notice. War was declared in form. The strayed cattle belonging to the smaller graziers were placed in the Rainbar yard from time to time, and kept there till taken away by their owners. They were not permitted to purchase any articles from the station store. And, in fine, a blockade cordon was morally drawn round that nucleus of agricultural co-operative progress which had called forth so many sanguine prophecies. Mr. Neuchamp was sternly immutable and indignant of attitude. Slow to arouse and difficult to persuade of intentional wrongdoing, he was *very* loath to retreat from any gage of battle thus produced.

Both Charley Banks and Jack Windsor regarded this latter step with disapprobation. It had been ridiculously credulous and weak, according to their mode of thought,

to invite the Freemans to settle on Rainbar. It was lamentably imprudent to quarrel openly with them now they *were* settled.

The second brother assented without much hostile observation, regretting that they had fallen out for nothing, as he expressed it; and Mr. Joe Freeman smiled in a scarcely reassuring manner, as Charley Banks thought, and said if it came to a pounding match, the cove would find that they could do him a deuced sight more hurt than he could do them.

Mr. Windsor, who had seen more of the ways of small freeholders, and understood their modes of feeling and action better than did Charley Banks, much less Mr. Neuchamp, did not regard this open declaration of hostilities as likely to add to their comfort, profit, or advantage.

'Mr. Neuchamp did a soft thing in bringing these chaps here, and now he's acting far from wise in letting 'em know what he thinks of 'em. He ought to have kept in with 'em and watched 'em, and if they went "on the cross" about the stock, he'd have had 'em safe and sound in Drewarrina Gaol some fine day.'

This was Jack's idea of justifiable free-selectoricide. It might occasionally miss fire, but in the long-run it was very likely to bag the 'picker-up of unconsidered trifles' in the shape of unbranded stock.

'Those chaps can do the boss a deuced sight more damage than he can do them if they're drove to it,' continued Mr. Windsor. 'They watch him when he isn't thinkin' of them, and if our cattle ain't on their land, they can *make 'em* trespass any night they please. I know the likes of them well, and I'd rather take 'em quiet than bustle 'em any day.'

'You're not far wrong, Jack,' assented Mr. Banks. 'We must keep these new cattle close, or they'll have a lot ready for Drewarrina pound some fine morning, as sure as my name is Charley Banks.'

By careful watching, by riding early and riding late, this highly probable outcome of the feud between Mr. Neuchamp and his late *protégés* was for a time avoided. But

> There never yet was human power
> Which could evade, if unforgiven,
> The patient search and vigil long
> Of him who treasures up a wrong.

It is questionable whether Byron had the operation of the Lands Occupation Act for the colony of New South Wales in view when he penned these lines, but they apply as closely to the general consequences of that great statute as if his lordship had intended to settle the affairs of Australia, after leading to victory the anti-Turkish party of the day.

The brothers Freeman, by a peculiar mental process, had managed to ignore the very substantial aid in cash and employment, the former still unrepaid, furnished by Mr. Neuchamp. By fixing all their attention upon his latter line of conduct, they became convinced that in denying their cattle access to every portion of the Rainbar run he had inflicted upon them a great wrong. This they determined to avenge if not to redress; and one fine morning an ill-written note, brought by a brown-faced urchin of ten years old about breakfast time, informed Mr. Neuchamp that William and Joseph Freeman had discovered three hundred and forty-seven of his cattle trespassing upon their land, which cattle were now in their custody, and which they proposed

driving to Drewarrina pound (about seventy miles off) if not forthwith released with damages and expenses paid.

'What in the name of all that's rascally can we do?' inquired Ernest of Charley Banks, as he tossed the note over to him across the breakfast table. 'I feel inclined to go down and take the cattle by force. The dishonest, scheming vagabonds!'

'That's what I should like to do,' said Banks, 'and I think Jack and I could hammer that Bill Freeman and his brother, but I'm afraid it won't do. If we rescue the cattle we can be summoned and fined; besides taking us all the way to that rascally hole of a township.'

'Then let them keep them, and drive them over to the pound. The damage can't be much.'

'And let them hunt them over, and yard them half the time?' demanded Mr. Banks. 'No, that wouldn't do either. The cattle wouldn't recover it for the whole season. You'll have to buy him off. So much a head. It's the shortest way through it.'

Mr. Neuchamp groaned. This way was degrading. A pecuniary loss, for which he did not care so much as he ought to have done, for Ernest was one of those people who rarely regard a cheque or order as the bag of golden sovereigns that anything over a ten-pound note really is. Also, a loss of dignity, which he felt keenly, that he should be placed in the dilemma of having to pay to release his own cattle from his own tenants, so to speak, or to see them injured and lowered in value by those base burghers of the corporation he had himself led into the land of promise!

'There is nothing else to be done,' said Charley. 'They have the best of us now; we must pay.'

'I don't believe the cattle were on their land at all,' pleaded the founder of the society.

'That's nothing,' opposed Mr. Banks, 'they'll swear they *found 'em there*, and bring three or four witnesses to prove it; you'd better give me a cheque for thirty pounds, and let me square it with them. I think we shall get out for that.'

Mr. Neuchamp much regretted sacrificing any portion of his latest and probably concluding advance from Messrs. Oldstile and Crampton in such an unsatisfactory manner, but was compelled to employ that only universal solvent, a cash payment. Mr. Banks departed with the magic missive. I have no authentic record of what actually passed between him and Bill Freeman, but he returned with the cattle. It was also noticed that no peculiar exacerbation occurred between the litigants after this interview.

Another month wore away in the performance of the ordinary work, and the endurance of rather more than the ordinary crosses and losses consequent upon the still protracted drought.

No rain. And again, no rain. Nothing grew. All nature became daily more wan, pale, leafless. The crop of expenses, inevitable and regular, in contradistinction to the produce of the season, grew and matured, until once more the limit of advance agreed to by Messrs. Oldstile and Crampton was definitely reached. Of this ultimate fact Mr. Neuchamp was unpleasantly reminded by the return, unpaid, of his last half-dozen orders, arriving by the mail preceding that which furnished an exceedingly formal letter, advising the unpleasant step which his agents, to their extreme regret, had been compelled to take.

Ernest felt this hitherto unknown annoyance to be the precursor of a financial earthquake, in which possibly his present possessions and future hopes might be engulfed.

He tried to consider his position with the calmness proper to so grave a conjuncture. But he had much difficulty in preserving the requisite freedom from disturbance. Ever and anon would come, as with a lightning flash, the vision of all his cherished projects disappearing down the dark chasm of insolvency and ruin.

His stud of Australian Arabs, now so promising, would be sold for the price of bush mustangs. His store cattle, nearly broken to the run, would be as valueless as if, in spite of their high breeding, they had been composed in great part of the 'scrub-danglers,' one of whom had so unwarrantably assaulted him on his arrival at Rainbar. His pet engineering scheme, unfinished and derided, would be henceforth ticketed among the denizens of the locality as Neuchamp's Folly. Ernest had not more than the ordinary share of self-love, through which nature makes provision for the preservation of the individual, but he commenced to feel by anticipation the pangs which are inseparable from pronounced failure in any soever enterprise or profession. He heard Mr. Jermyn Croker's unqualified verdict that 'he had always been a philanthropic lunatic, from whom nothing else could have been expected; the only wonder being that any one had been found fool enough to trust him, and thereby enable him to make so respectable a smash of it.' Others doubtless would follow in the same suit. Even the good-natured Parklands and the charitable Aymer Brandon, who gave, as they required indeed, much frank

social absolution, could scarcely refrain from unreserved condemnation of his 'improvement' theory. As to the 'grateful tenantry' idea, represented by Freeman Brothers, with their grass-rights, their hostility, and their herds and their flocks—for they had lately purchased a thousand debilitated travelling sheep at about sixpence per head—it would not bear thinking of. He was now in full endurance of the reactionary stage of despondency occasionally bestowed as a counterpoise to the ordinarily high average of tone with which the sanguine man is blessed or cursed, as the case may be. As Mr. Neuchamp reviewed his generous and lofty aims, his far-reaching plans and projects dependent upon so kindly a future for success, he inclined to the latter reading. They appeared to him in this his dark hour as the fantasies of an opium-eater or the dream-palaces of a slumbering child.

Mr. Neuchamp, after a day spent in sad consideration, unfortunately permitted himself to pursue the unending evil of regret during the night. His heightened imagination multiplied disaster and enlarged evil to such a degree that he was more than once tempted to spring from his thorny couch and take to the broad starlit plain for the relief of exercise.

> 'So sore was the delirious goad,
> I took my steed and forth I rode,'

says the remorseful Marmion; and but that in the present state of the fodder market no horses had been stabled at Rainbar for many a day, our latter-day Crusader might have followed out the idea literally. As it was he but arose at earliest dawn and mechanically took the garden path, trusting to find some excuse for an hour or

two of hard manual labour which might guide or exorcise the evil spirits that were rending his very soul.

He had been putting out all his strength for an hour or more, and was in much the same bodily state and condition as if he had taken a ten-mile spin with a great-coat on, after the prescription of Mr. Geoffry Delamayn, when he observed a solitary horseman wending his way along the 'up-river' road, which was distinguishable more by dust than by colouring from the grassless waste through which it wound.

The stranger, who was habited in a collarless Crimean shirt and rather dilapidated habiliments generally, rode his emaciated steed steadily on at the slow, hopeless, leg-weary jog to which most of the horses of the territory had long been reduced, until he reached the garden gate. Ernest,—taking him for granted as the usual 'reporter' of travelling sheep, about to clear off the last fragments of what once had been pasture; an invalid shepherd, making for the Drewarrina Hospital; a mounted tramp or 'traveller' looking for work, with no great hope of, or indeed concern about, finding it; or lastly, a supernumerary for some travelling stock caravan, who had been 'hunted' for drunkenness or inefficiency,—raised not his head. For any or all of these toilers of the waste there would be the unvarying hospitality of the men's hut. But the stranger sat calmly upon his despondent horse at the gate surveying Ernest's exceedingly efficient spade performance with apparent approval, until at length he broke silence. 'My word, Mr. Noochamp, you're nigh as good as a Chinaman. You'd make wages at post-hole digging, if the rain forgets to come and we're all smothered. How's those A1 store cattle getting on?'

Ernest looked up hastily and indignantly at the first tones of the stranger's accost, but immediately relaxed his visage and flung down his spade as he recognised in the horseman's countenance the grave, reflective lineaments of Abstinens Levison.

END OF VOL. II

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